

## Right-Side Up: Sweet Dreams are Made of This by midas\_touch\_of\_angst

**Series:** [Right-Side Up AU \[Stranger Things \(2016\)\]](#) [1]

**Category:** Stranger Things (TV 2016)

**Genre:** Alternate Universe, Alternate Universe - Canon Divergence, Alternate Universe - Character Swap, Alternate Universe - Power Swap, Alternate Universe - Reverse, Alternate Universe - Role Reversal, Alternate Universe - Superheroes/Superpowers, F/M, Found Family, Friendship, Gen, Missing Persons

**Language:** English

**Characters:** Demogorgon (Stranger Things), Dustin Henderson, Eleven (Stranger Things), Jim "Chief" Hopper, Jonathan Byers, Joyce Byers, Lucas Sinclair, Martin Brenner, Max (Stranger Things), Max Mayfield (Stranger Things), Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Mike Wheeler, Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington, Will Byers

**Relationships:** Dustin Henderson & Mike Wheeler, Eleven & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Eleven & Lucas Sinclair, Eleven & Maxine "Max" Mayfield, Eleven & Mike Wheeler, Eleven & Nancy Wheeler, Eleven/Mike Wheeler, Jonathan Byers & Nancy Wheeler, Jonathan Byers & Will Byers, Joyce Byers & Jim "Chief" Hopper, Lucas Sinclair & Mike Wheeler, Martin Brenner & Dustin Henderson, Martin Brenner & Lucas Sinclair, Martin Brenner & Mike Wheeler, Martin Brenner & Will Byers, Mike Wheeler & Nancy Wheeler, Steve Harrington & Dustin Henderson, Will Byers & Mike Wheeler

**Status:** Completed

**Published:** 2017-11-06

**Updated:** 2017-12-16

**Packaged:** 2022-04-03 14:49:07

**Rating:** Teen And Up Audiences

**Warnings:** Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings, No Archive Warnings Apply

**Chapters:** 37

**Words:** 68,728

**Publisher:** [archiveofourown.org](http://archiveofourown.org)

**Summary:**

Reverse!AU: When the small-town Sheriff's daughter, El Hopper, goes into the woods to find the missing girl, Max Mayfield, she instead

finds a lost boy with mysterious powers. While the two of them search for their lost friends, they find that there might be something more sinister going on in the seemingly normal town that could destroy everything.

Rated Teen and Up for Swearing.

Season Two: [http://archiveofourown.org/works/13046202?](http://archiveofourown.org/works/13046202?view_full_work=true)  
[view\\_full\\_work=true](http://archiveofourown.org/works/13046202?view_full_work=true)

# 1. Mad Max

## Notes for the Chapter:

Alright so, I sorta had this weird idea for a Reverse AU, and it sorta turned into a fic. So... yeah.

## CHAPTER ONE

### *Mad Max*

“I win! Ha!”

El let out a mock groan as she slowed her bike, stopping behind the redhead on her skateboard. “You got me.” she said. “What a shock.”

Max grinned, picking up her board and starting to shove it into her backpack. “Tellin’ you, El, you gotta start skating. Otherwise I’ll just keep beating you everywhere.”

“No, no, I’m not wiping out a fifth time.” El laughed, as she started to park her bike on the rack outside the Arcade. “Nice try, Maxine.”

Max smirked as she waited for El, arms crossed. “You know the rules, though. I got here first, I get first pick.”

“I’m gonna guess ‘Dig Dug’.” El said, as her best friend nodded. “You still need a cheerleader, or am I too slow for that?”

“Hmm, I think you’ll be alright.” Max said. “Where am I gonna find a better Player Two, anyway?”

“Come on, Max, hurry it up!”

The girls had definitely spent days at the arcade before, but El was *really* supposed to be home in ten minutes, and they’d already spent four hours going between games. They were finally at the new game-

*Dragon's Lair* - and Max had spent the last hour trying to beat it.

"It's not my fault this is the most difficult game in the *world!*" Max huffed. "What the *hell* am I supposed to do?"

"We can beat it later, Dad'll kill me if I'm late again." El said. "Or he'll kill you!"

"I think this goddamn game might kill me first." Max groaned. "Wait! Wait!"

She paused, as her character- Dirk the Daring- stopped in a room. A bright light was flickering on a potion in front of her, with a "Drink Me" sign above it. "What does that mean?"

"It's glowing, maybe you should avoid it?" El suggested.

"The last time I ignored something shiny, I got decimated." Max said. "I'm gonna drink it."

"Max-"

Max let out a string of curse words as Dirk downed the potion and subsequently turned to dust. "Piece of *shit!* Piece of *SHIT!*"

"Who makes glowing poisons?" El yelled. "Why is there even a *poison* there?"

"What a ripoff!" Max groaned, crossing her arms. "I'm gonna try again!"

"Come on, Max, we really gotta go." El said.

"But I wanna beat it!" Max said. "We've gotta rescue the princess, El!"

"Princess can wait, I don't wanna get grounded again." El rolled her eyes. "And you don't wanna be late, right?"

"As if anyone would notice." Max said. She paused. "Maybe... maybe I could stay for a little longer? And you could leave?"

“Aren’t you gonna want someone to drop you off?” El asked. They’d planned to ride together to Max’s house, then El would ride to the Police Station to wait for her Dad’s shift to end.

“Pfft, I’ll be fine.” Max said. “I can handle myself.”

El paused, and Max punched her on the shoulder. “Come on, El. I know you wanna be here when I beat the game, but once I figure it out, I can show you how to do it yourself!”

Finally, El shrugged. “If you say so. But if you, like, fall into a pit on the way home or something, don’t come crying to me.”

“I don’t cry.” Max said. “See ya tomorrow, Player Two.”

El grinned. “Have fun, Player One.”

Max fished some quarters out of her pocket as El walked away. The arcade was starting to empty out, so Max would be alone with her thoughts. That just made playing easier for her, anyway, she wouldn’t have to deal with idiots chatting behind her while she tried to beat the game. Which she would. Eventually.

“Son of a *bitch!*” Max yelled, kicking the game as her character was swept away in rushing water. “Son of a *shitty-ass bitch!*”

“Could you tone it down?” said a voice behind her, and Max turned to see Keith, the Arcade’s employee. “God, what are you still doing here?”

“Trying to beat this bullshit.” Max said. “I’m outta quarters. Can I get some off of you?”

“No way, arcade’s closed.” Keith shrugged. “Better luck next time, Road Warrior.”

“Son of a bitch.” Max muttered under her breath. “Thanks for nothing, nerd.”

Keith rolled his eyes. “I’m locking up. Unless you want to stay the

night with the rats, I'd suggest you leave."

Max huffed and stormed off, making sure the door slammed behind her as she went outside. She looked around; the road was much darker than she thought it'd be. Well, it wasn't a problem. She could skateboard home blindfolded if she had to. She'd gone this way a million times before.

Down the road she went, her feet growing tired as she moved along. Maybe she shoulda left with El. It wasn't like she was going to beat that game any time soon. She just kept dying and dying and...

What was *that*?

Max paused as she heard an odd noise behind her. She put her foot down, stopping her movement forwards. She turned slowly, her hair brushing off her shoulder. She barely noticed the lights in the houses around her flicker, she had eyes only for the shadow behind her, a shadow that was getting *bigger*.

Oh shit.

Oh *shit*.

She supposed she should have screamed, called for help, tried to find someone. But adults had never helped her before, and she didn't expect anyone to help her now. So she saved her breath and just skated. She didn't care where she was going anymore, she just wanted to go *fast*. Faster than that Thing behind her.

It seemed useless. She didn't stop to look, but she could hear movement behind her, which seemed to be keeping speed. What was behind her? What was that *thing*?

Suddenly, she looked up and realized she'd skated far past her house. She was at the edge of the woods, trees ahead of her. She didn't stop; there was no way she could turn back now. She jumped off the board, kicking it behind her and starting into the forest. She began to run, leaping over roots and fallen branches. She kept on running, hearing steps behind her every now and again, along with a more constant noise; a low growl.

She didn't know where she was headed, only that maybe if she was fast enough, she could outrun it. She kept going, trying to start to move in a zig-zag pattern; El's Dad had once said that that was a good way to throw off a pursuer. Even still, she could hear the growls behind her. They wouldn't *stop*.

Max's eyes lit up as she turned a tree and saw a familiar sight; El's Dad's storage shed. She and El had snuck out there several times to dig through boxes and play hide-and-seek, and she knew exactly what she could find there.

She picked up the pace, the ache in her legs growing as she did, and ran into the shed, which thankfully was unlocked. She shut the door behind her, turning the locks as she did. She slowly edged back, as something thudded against the door. Something *big*.

"Shit." Max muttered as she caught her breath, before turning around and running across the creaky floor. She managed to find the loose floorboard, dropping to her knees and tossing the boxes on top of it aside, digging her hands into the wood to lift it up. When it finally caved, she reached down and pulled out a shotgun.

El had asked her Dad about it once, and he said it was only for emergencies, and only for his use.

Well, unfortunately, Max was gonna have to break that last rule.

Her own Dad had taught her how to use a shotgun once, when she was about six years old, a few months before she'd moved to Hawkins. She was quite rusty, obviously, but she still got the basics down. She did a quick check to see that it was loaded, and then stood up. She was having trouble seeing anything; the one lightbulb that still worked was flickering a lot. But she could hear well enough, and she could hear the thuds on the door. It was about to give way.

Max walked back to the door, pointing the gun at it and waiting. If she was going to die here, it wasn't going to be without a fight.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

I posted a few notes and stuff on this AU on my blog,

if y'all want it I can add a link next chapter. But it's mostly a Reverse!AU of the kids, the other groups "technically" are the same, but there are some major differences due to there being more superpowered children then before. Let me know what you think!  
:D



## 2. Missing

### CHAPTER TWO

#### *Missing*

“Thanks again, Mr. Clarke.” El said, sitting cross-legged on the floor outside the AV Room.

“It’s really no trouble, Miss Hopper.” her teacher said, fumbling with the keys on the door lock. “All Curiosity Voyages need their paddles.”

El stared up blankly at him. “I’m not sure what that means.”

Mr. Clarke shrugged. “Do you know why Max couldn’t make it today? You two are the only kids here really interested in this stuff.”

El shook her head. “She was up late last night, maybe she was just tired.”

“Hmm, I think her Mom would have made her come.” Mr. Clarke shrugged.

El kept her mouth shut, but she knew that that was a *very* untrue statement. Max’s Mom couldn’t make her do anything, nor would she even try anyway.

“I’m sure she’s fine, though. Probably just sick.” Mr. Clarke said, breaking El out of her thoughts.

She nodded, standing up. “I’ll check on her on the way home.”

“Good idea.” her teacher nodded. “Say ‘Hi’ for me, okay?”

El smiled as she shouldered her bag. “And I’ll give her her homework, too. She’ll love me for that.”

She waved goodbye as she started down the hall. Nobody was in the school except for her and a few teachers, and maybe some kids in

detention. She liked leaving school late; not only did she get to hang with Mr. Clarke in the AV Club and see all his new gadgets- today he'd brought in an actual *ham shack*, and she couldn't wait to tell Max all about it- but she could avoid all the assholes who wandered the halls of Hawkins Middle School. Sure, they could call her and Max names before school and at lunch, but after school was safe.

"Hey, golden girl!"

Shit.

El turned, glaring at Troy and James, the two older boys who were leaning against the lockers. The two teens who seemed to think it was fun to pick on younger kids. A thought briefly crossed her mind; Max wasn't there, and she could probably beat up the boys herself. However, she decided against it; she didn't want to have to explain to her Dad why she'd decided to beat the shit out of two teens.

"What the hell are you two doing in school?" El asked instead. "You fail Math Class again?"

"I'd ask you the same thing." Troy rolled his eyes. "Your Dad couldn't pay off the teachers?"

"My Dad wouldn't sink to your level, mouth-breather." El rolled her eyes. "Now shut the hell up, I've got more important stuff to do."

"You mean like Red?" James mocked, and El huffed as they started to follow her down the hall. "She skip school to skate off a cliff today?"

"She's sick." El lied. "Now *shut. Up.*"

"Make us." said Troy, and El realized the boys weren't going to stop following her.

She paused, not really wanting to get into a fistfight today, then yelled, "Mr. Clarke! I forgot my book!"

The boys' eyes widened, not having realized a teacher was so close. By the time Mr. Clarke turned into the hallway, asking El what she'd left behind, the boys had run off.

"Nevermind, I found it." El smiled, gesturing to her bag. "Was buried under my lunchbag. See you tomorrow!"

"For the love of-" El muttered under her breath, as she rung the doorbell for the fifth consecutive time. "What the *hell*?"

Finally, the door swung open, and El glared up at the tall figure of Billy Hargrove, Max's stepbrother and the biggest shthead in Hawkins. "What do we have here?" he asked, a smirk on his stupid face.

El simply said, "I wanna talk to Max."

"So would I." Billy said. "But she hasn't been home all day."

El blinked. "What?"

"You heard me, you little shit, Max hasn't been here since she wandered off with you last night."

El glared. "Where are your parents?"

"They're at work, like adults." Billy said. "Listen, unless you want to loot my sister's stuff while you're here, I'd suggest you skedaddle. I don't wanna babysit when I don't have to."

El gave him another glare and resisted the urge to flip him off. "Thanks for the help." she said sarcastically.

Billy shut the door in her face, and she let out a small, frustrated scream, before she walked back down the steps. After a second, she paused and ran over to the side of the house, picking a rock up off the ground and tossing it at the window she knew to be her friend's. "Max!" she called. "Max!"

No response. Wow, she really *wasn't* there.

So where *was* she?

El checked the Arcade, and the park, and even the schoolyard again. No sign of her. She was starting to get really worried. Max never just up and vanished- especially not without a trace. If there was one thing Max was, she was *loud*. Someone had to have seen her, right?

She eventually sat on a bench at the park and pulled a walkie-talkie out of her bag; her Dad had given it to her in case of emergencies, but she had gotten two more and given them to her two friends, for late-night talks and checkups. She opened up the right Channel, and called, “Max?”

She got an answer, but it wasn’t from Max. “El?”

“Nancy?” El called into the communicator. “What’re you doing here?”

“I was just about to message you, I’m gonna have to cancel our appointment tonight, I have a big test and I’ve gotta study.”

El had forgotten all about the appointment. Nancy was her and Max’s tutor; they used to be *really* bad at math. And while they were alright now, they liked spending time with the teenage girl. She didn’t treat them like idiots due to their age or gender, didn’t seem to care that they would prefer to play video games and DnD instead of more “normal” games, and she would sometimes give her old outfits to the girls if she grew out of them. And besides, who *wouldn’t* want to be friends with a cool highschooler?

“A big test?” El asked skeptically. “On what?”

“Psychology stuff.”

“And you’re not going on a date or anything?”

El heard a bit of silence on the other end, before Nancy said, “What? No. No, why would- I have to study, El.”

El sighed, knowing full well that this was a blatant lie. She and Max had never really liked Nancy’s boyfriend, Steve; not only did he hang around with the biggest assholes in the High School, he was dating *their* friend and taking up all her time.

"Is Max there?" El eventually asked. Maybe she'd shown up at Nancy's to study early, or-

"No. Why would she be?"

"She wasn't at school today, and her brother says she's not home."

Nancy was silent for a little longer, then said, "She's probably at the Arcade. Why don't you check there?"

El didn't want to mention she'd already done that. "I'm gonna check with my Dad. I'm probably gonna be late to the Station if I stay out any longer. Call in if you hear from her?"

"Of course. Good luck, El."

El muttered a quiet "thank you" before she put the walkie-talkie back in her backpack and jumped onto her bike.

She finally made it to the Police Station, parking outside and chaining her bike up to the rack. She walked in, greeted Flo and the other officers, and knocked on her Dad's office door.

"Come on in!" he called, and El bit her lip, trying to keep her nerves under control, and walked in. "It's a mess, but what else is new?"

Her Dad, Chief Jim Hopper, was sitting at his desk, going through some dumb files that he'd likely complain about over dinner. El usually liked hearing him talk about his cases, no matter how boring he thought they were, but she had much more important things to do.

"Dad-"

"Someone vandalized the General Store yesterday, it's stupid but everyone expects us to get to it." Hopper said, going through the file. "If you want some Coffee, Flo can get that. I'm gonna have to-"

"Dad, I think Max is missing."

Hopper looked up from his files, looking blankly at her. "What?"

"Max wasn't at school today." El said.

"She's skipped school before."

"Yeah, but she wasn't at home, either. I checked." El said. "And she's not at the park, and Keith said she left the Arcade late last night."

"I thought you dropped her off at home."

Shit. She'd forgotten to mention that little detail. "She wanted to skate home alone last night, so she could stay longer. I... I thought it'd be okay, but... she's just *gone*..."

"Hey, hey!" Hopper stood up and put an arm on her shoulder, and El realized she'd been shaking. "It's alright, El. She's fine. You know Max, she can handle anything."

El gave a quick nod.

"And you know Hawkins. Nothing *really* bad happens here."

She gave another nod; however, she felt something *bad* in her stomach. Something didn't feel right.

"She might have gotten lost on the way home. I'll check around town, alright?"

El looked up. "Can I come?"

Hopper shook his head. "No. You stay here and get a head start on your homework."

"Can you tell me when you've found her? Through the channel?" El asked, referring to her Walkie-Talkie.

"Of course." Hopper said. "And if I'm not here by Four, have one of the Officers take you home. I'm pretty sure they're competent enough for that."

El sat down on a chair in front of the desk, dropping her bag to the

floor. “Are you *sure* she’ll be okay?”

Hopper nodded, and El could tell he believed it. “Nothing happens in Hawkins, El. Worst thing that’s occurred since I was Chief was a cat wandering into the street. Max’ll be fine.”

El really hoped he was right.

A boy came out of the forest.

He winced every time his footsteps made a noise, and every time his bare feet stepped on a sharp rock or broken twig. He slowly crept towards the building at the edge of the woods, hearing faint music and a distant talking. The noise was scaring him a little, as it meant people were there, but he could smell what he believed to be food, and that was something he was pretty sure he was going to need.

He found a door in the back, which opened with a simple push. He looked around, startled with how *cluttered* it was. He had no idea that this much stuff could be allowed in one place. He carefully walked inside, wincing as he realized the floor was cold. His eyes darted from shelf to shelf, looking for something.

His eyes fell on a table in the center of the room. He didn’t recognize what was on the plate atop the table, but he figured it was some kind of food. He grabbed something, a small yellow stick, and carefully put it in his mouth. Yes, this was probably food. He grabbed the plate and looked around, trying to find something to store it in. He hadn’t grabbed a box or anything, and he needed to get the food to-

“Hey! Kid!”

He heard the voice behind him, and he froze for just a second, panic settling into him. In a flash, he started to run back to the door, still carrying the plate. Unfortunately, he tripped over something, and toppled to the ground, the food spilling everywhere. He tried to stand to his feet, only to feel a hand grab his arm. “What do you think you’re doin’?” He heard.

He whipped around, staring down the man who’d grabbed him. He

briefly thought of giving him a *push*, until he saw the confused look on the man's face. The boy didn't recognize him, and he didn't look like a danger.

"What are you doin' here, kid?" The man asked. "Where are your parents?"

The boy didn't know what he was talking about, so he simply stared, still breathing heavily.

"Do you have a name? Are you hurt?"

Still the boy was silent.

"Do you want food?"

The boy looked up at the man, suddenly more attentive. He let out a shaky nod, glancing down at the spilled plate on the floor. That'd probably be useless, now.

Besides, if this man was going to give him food, he saw no reason he shouldn't take it.

They could wait a little longer.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

Turns out writing Hopper is hard, mostly cause he's a full-time Dad from the start in this. Don't worry, though, he's still awesome.

Also, now the plot has begun.



CHAPTER THREE

011

“You don’t talk much, kid?”

The boy looked up from his basket of food, staring blankly up at the man who had brought it to him. He had been talking about his “diner”, using words that the boy didn’t recognize, but he had been assured that the two of them were alone. Apparently the diner was “closed” or something, and “Henry” and “Earl” had just left.

“Have you got a name?”

The boy still stayed silent, still staring.

“Why’s your hair shaved off?”

Why did this guy ask so many questions? He sure talked a lot. Usually people didn’t talk to him, especially not this long.

“Are your parents around? Did you run away?”

The boy kept himself still, unresponsive, temporarily ignoring his food. He learned pretty quickly that emotional reactions did him no good.

“Did your parents forget to feed you? Is that why you ran? Did you go to the hospital, get scared, end up here?”

The boy moved to grab his food again, and jumped when the man pulled the food away. He looked up and glared at the man, preparing to take the food back if he had to.

“Listen, you can have this back, and you can even have some ice cream if you want, but you gotta answer some questions.”

As if that was happening. Still... he didn't quite feel like grabbing the food right now. Maybe he would give him his food back eventually, if he waited long enough.

"Do you have a name? My name's Benny, Benny Hammond."

The boy glared at him and reached to take the food. Benny pulled away, but looked down at his arm and stared. The boy flinched and inwardly scolded himself for moving without thinking; he pulled back, but the damage was done; the man had seen his tattoo: a simple *011* on the wrist.

"Eleven?" the man asked. "What's that mean?"

The boy paused, considering, then pointed to himself.

"So, Eleven's your name?"

The boy nodded.

Benny sighed. "And what's the hospital gown for?"

The boy looked down at his clothes. It was pretty dirty from wandering through the forest all night. But he didn't have any other clothes; he'd never worn any other outfit, really. He simply shrugged.

"Alright, what do you say you stay here, and I'm going to call some people who can help you?"

Scared by the idea of more people coming, the boy shook his head.

"Listen, kid, I'll make sure nothing happens to you, alright?"

Well, the man did seem like he wanted to help, unlike other people who would say that to him. However, as Benny stood, the boy finally spoke. "More?"

"Well, I'll be damned, he talks." the man quipped, looking down at the boy again. "What do you want more of?"

The boy held out the basket of food.

“You want more food? You haven’t even finished yet.”

The boy shook his head. “For the others.”

“Others?”

He shouldn’t have said that. He fell silent and glanced down at the floor.

“Kid, have you got siblings? Friends?”

He nodded.

“Where are they?”

“Hiding.”

Benny paused. “Okay. I can get you more food for your siblings. Maybe once the nice people come, you can show us where they are?”

If the nice people were nice, the boy didn’t see any reason not to. But if they weren’t as kind as Benny thought... well, he wasn’t going to let anything happen to the others. He stayed still instead, waiting for Benny to leave.

Once he did, he realized that the room’s silence was broken by a fan in the corner, constantly spinning around in a loop. Around and around and around, and the metal seemed to be getting louder and louder and *louder and louder*. It was *annoying* and he wanted it to *stop*. *Stop!*

He stared at the fan as hard as he could, focusing only on the spinning blades. The lights flickered once, the fan made a screeching noise of protest, and then it held still.

The boy wiped his bleeding nose on his sleeve and continued eating.

“Did you get any information outta Billy?” El asked.

She was lying on her bed at home now, her completed homework

stacked unevenly in front of her. She rolled over, staring up at the ceiling as she waited for her Dad's response.

"You're right, that kid's an asshole. But we did confirm that she didn't make it home last night, and her Mother says she hasn't heard from her."

"You don't think she ran away, do you?"

El really hoped he would say no, but her Dad's next reply over the Walkie-Talkie wasn't that conclusive. "It's possible. We're going around town again."

"Let me know if you find anything!" El said. "Or if you need any help, I can-"

"No, you stay home." Hopper said, and El groaned. "I'm going to check with her Stepfather at his work. Maybe he took her there for some reason."

"I doubt it. He's also a jerk." El said. "Are you sure I can't do anything?"

"You can keep calling her. She'll probably pick up eventually, maybe-"

Her Dad trailed off. "Dad?" El called. "Are you still there?"

There was some more silence, and El wondered if maybe her connection was off. After about a minute, Hopper called in again. "El, I'm going to have to call you back."

"Did you find her? Is she there?" El asked, sitting up, suddenly excited.

"No. Listen, just stay home."

Oh no. "Wh-what's wrong?"

"Nothing's wrong, El."

"Dad, don't lie. What's wrong?"

She tried to breathe slowly, keep herself under control. What had he found? What was going on?

“Well, don’t panic, but we just found her skateboard outside the woods.”

Max wouldn’t go *anywhere* without her skateboard.

El didn’t respond, waiting for more news. When her Dad finally talked again, he said that they were going to keep looking and to stay calm, it was probably alright, it probably just fell out of her bag or something. El said something numbly in response, then told him that she was going to keep doing her homework.

Once her Dad signed off, El clipped the Walkie-Talkie to her belt. There was no way she was staying home now. She was going to find Max herself if she had to.

## 4. Found

### CHAPTER FOUR

#### *Found*

“You like that ice cream, huh?”

The boy looked up and nodded. While Benny was running water over his dishes, he let the boy sit on the counter and eat ice cream from a bucket. A basket of extra food was set beside him; not much, and the boy assumed that was because Benny assumed the nice people would help him and his friends. He didn't want to ask for even more; Benny seemed to be quite busy, and he didn't like asking for things, anyway.

“You've got a nice smile.”

The boy paused. Was he smiling? He dropped his face into a blank expression again, but the damage was done.

“You don't have to do that. It's alright to look happy every now and again.”

The boy stared again.

“You know...” Benny gave him an awkward smile, and after some hesitation, the boy smiled back. “There ya go. That's better.”

A bell rang, and the boy jumped, shoving the ice cream bucket onto the counter beside him and moving to get down.

“No, no, it's okay. Don't worry.” Benny said, and the boy stopped, looking up at him. “I'll go see who's there. Stay here for now.”

As Benny left, the boy started to shake, hearing muted voices talking in the other room. He moved to grab the basket of food, holding it close to him in case he had to leave quickly.

He saw Benny out the room's window, walking with a vaguely

familiar woman, saying something about “child services” and “phone conversations.” The boy started to settle; Benny looked alright, and he seemed to be-

BANG.

The woman had pulled out a gun, and suddenly Benny was on the ground. The boy held back a gasp, and turned, running, using his shoulders to push his way through the doors. He started running past the shelves again, ignoring the cold underneath his feet. He skidded to a stop as two men walked from behind the shelves, pointing their guns at him. He froze, panicking, and dropped the basket of food, throwing out his hands and shutting his eyes.

He heard the men scream, and two thuds hit the ground. He started to run again, bursting out the doors and back into the woods. He forgot the food, but that wasn't important right now. What was important was that he had been found, and he needed to find the others *now*.

El figured out pretty quickly that a search party had been sent out. From what she knew, that never meant good news.

She had biked over to Max's house one more time, throwing rocks at Max's window until she got scared that she might break the glass. She did, however, hear her Dad over the walkie-talkie as she changed channels, talking to the other officers and saying something about her trail disappearing at a shed, and to start looking through the woods.

Why would Max go into the woods? She *hated* bugs and dirt, and had trouble skating among the leaves and twigs and roots. There was no way she would have voluntarily gone into the woods, especially so late at night.

She considered going to Nancy's house and asking her for help, but she'd claimed to be “studying”- which El was definitely sure meant she was screwing her boyfriend.

The sky started to darken, so she biked home again, rushing inside

and grabbing an empty backpack from her room, stashing it with food and digging a flashlight out of her Dad's drawer. As she was grabbing a pen to scrawl a note, she heard a buzz on her Walkie-Talkie. She picked it up quickly, responding, "It's El!"

"Hey," came her Dad's voice, "I'm gonna be a bit late. Max really hid herself well, huh?"

"She's pretty good at hiding." El forced a laugh, pretending that she wasn't as terrified as she was.

Her Dad wasn't fooled. "Don't worry, El, we'll find her and find out what's wrong. In the meantime, stay home. I'm going to try and contact the other officers, they're God-knows-where right now and we all need to interview her family again."

El thought for a second, then said, "Actually, I was wondering if I could go study with Nancy? I'm a bit late for our tutoring appointment but I think she'll understand why."

"No. I'm sure she'll forgive you two for missing one tutoring session, just stay in the house."

"Alright, I won't go anywhere." El lied. "See you later!"

Once they both signed off, El shouldered her backpack and started towards the door. At least now, if he got home before her, he'd think she was at Nancy's instead of the middle of the woods.

Suddenly, the phone rung.

El froze, turning back to the wall. Nobody ever called their house; Dad didn't have any other family, and anyone who needed them would call the Police Station. The only one who had their number was...

El rushed forwards, grabbing the phone and pulling it to her ear. "Max?"

At first, she thought it was silent. But she could hear some faint breathing on the other end of the line. "Max? Are you there? What's going on?"



The lights in the house started to flicker. El jumped, looking around, and suddenly there was a surge in her hands. She screamed and dropped the phone, her hands burning. It crashed onto the floor, a *snap* splitting the cord and breaking the device. El looked down in horror and confusion, breathing deeply as thunder rolled outside.

What had just *happened*?

“Max! *Max!*”

Truth be told, El really should have had a better plan than simply biking into the woods and yelling for her friend, a flashlight tied to her handrails and rain pouring on her head. Still, there wasn’t really anything better she could do.

“*Max!*”

She heard a rustle in the bushes, and slowed to a halt, turning around to stare into the leaves. It was hard to see through the storm, but *something* had moved. “Max?”

She slowly got off her bike, taking the flashlight in her hands and stepping closer, peering through the raindrops. “Max?”

*It’s probably an animal.* She told herself. *Maybe I’ll get rabies or something.* That *would at least be interesting.*

“Max, seriously, get out of there. We need to go home.”

No, it wasn’t an animal. She thought she could see the edge of a dress under a branch.

“Max!”

She rushed forwards, pushing aside the leaves, only to see the person inside disappear out the back. Unperturbed, she leaned back, put a hand on the top of the bush, and leapt over.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t jump very far.

Tripping over the top of the bush, El toppled into the person, the two of them falling into the mud. El sat up, scooting away, and waved her flashlight in front of her, shining it into the face of the person she'd accidentally tackled.

It wasn't Max.

It was a very worried boy with shaved hair.

## 5. Mike

### CHAPTER FIVE

*Mike*

“Shh! I don’t want Dad to find you. Then he’ll know I left the house...”

The boy behind El looked puzzled, but nodded and stayed quiet. She’d just chained her bike back up outside and was dragging the boy in from the back door. El held his hand as he stepped inside, flinching at the cold floor. She slowly let go to lock the door behind them, and then turned to see the boy inspecting a lamp in the hallway. He moved to touch it, and El sighed and tapped his shoulder. He jumped around, a panicked look in his eyes, but calmed once he saw it was just El.

“I think we’re alone. Come on, you can stay in the attic for now.” El said. “Dad doesn’t go up there, so as long as you’re quiet you should be good.”

The boy seemed confused, so she just grabbed his hand and had him follow her again.

They ran up the stairs, and El opened up the trapdoor to the attic, gesturing for the boy to climb the rope ladder that fell down with the door. He did, though he often glanced back at the girl to make sure she was following. Once they were up, El closed the door and turned to the boy, who was looking around in astonishment.

“Yeah, there’s a lotta stuff up here.” El said, looking around at the stacks of boxes. “Sorry about that, but I can take our old blankets and make you a fort.”

The boy looked at her in confusion before sitting down on a chair cushion.

El sat on the floor in front of him, grinning. “I’m El. Do you have a

name?"

The boy was silent, before looking down at the ground.

"Hey, it's okay! You're safe here." El said, reaching forwards and grabbing the boy's hand. He flinched, but looked up at her.

"You can stay for tonight." El smiled. "Then tomorrow, we can sneak you out and in again and my Dad can find your parents!"

The boy shook his head wildly.

"You *don't* want to find your parents?" When he didn't respond, El said, "My Dad says that happens all the time in the city. And Max doesn't like her parents much either. Well, you can tell Dad about whatever they did. He's a Policeman, he takes care of people who are hurting others."

The boy didn't respond.

"Are you deaf?" El asked, genuinely curious. She reached forwards and clapped, startling the boy and causing him to flinch back. "Nope." she deduced. "Maybe you don't speak English? ... uh, *hablas espanol? Parlez-vous français?*"

The boy shook his head, still confused.

"I don't know any other languages... alright, uh, maybe I should get you some clothes. Yours are pretty messy." El said, standing up and moving to a box in the corner, full of some of her Dad's old clothes from when he was a kid. He'd talked about getting rid of them plenty of times, but once something was in the attic, it stayed in the attic forever. She wasn't sure what the boy would like, so she eventually just picked up the whole box, deciding to let him pick out what he wanted to wear.

When she turned back, she found that the boy was digging through a different box. She walked forwards and glanced over his shoulder, seeing some of the old books she'd liked as a kid. He was flipping through them, looking astonished at the pages.

"My Dad used to read me those." she said. "They're pretty cool."

The boy held up one of the books, his fingers tracing a picture on the page. He smiled, obviously enjoying the detail in the image.

“You like *Peter Pan*?” El asked.

The boy looked at her, smiling, and said, “Pretty.”

El’s eyes widened. “You can talk!”

The boy took a breath, and looked down again.

“It’s alright. You can talk to me.”

The boy was still silent, and El sat in front of him again, placing her box beside her. “Have you got a name?” she asked.

The boy blinked at her, looking a little worried.

“My name’s El.” she said. “It’s short for Jane Eleanor Hopper, but I like El better. Jane Eleanor sounds like a Princess, which is nice, I guess, but El sounds like a Knight. I think that’d be more fun.”

The boy looked confused.

“Look, I’d like to be able to call you something.” El said. “Is there any kinda name you’ve got?”

The boy paused, before slowly moving his arm towards her. El looked down, to see he had a tattoo on his wrist- “011.”

“Eleven?” El asked.

The boy nodded. “Eleven.” he repeated.

“Who gave you that name?” El asked. “And that tattoo? Are you like, a mental patient? Do they tattoo mental patients?”

The boy looked confused again.

“Well, Eleven’s kinda a weird name. I could call you Evan. That’s kinda a nickname.”

The boy blinked. “El-Evan?”

"No, just Evan. I'm El, you're Evan."

"El... Evan?"

El put a hand on her chest. "El." She put a hand to the boy's chest. "Evan."

He blinked. "Eleven."

El sighed. "I'll call you something else. Something completely different so you don't get confused..."

The boy, still not paying attention, looked down at the book again.

"Maybe I could get you a name from a book." El suggested. "Hmm, maybe Ned, like in *Nancy Drew*? That's my favorite. Or Atticus. Or Finn... you know, like Huckleberry Finn..."

The boy looked down at the *Peter Pan* book again, clearly bewildered about what she was saying.

"We can take a name from that!" El suggested. "How do you like Peter? John? Michael?"

The boy looked up at her, with a sort of dazed interest. "Michael?"

El smiled, nodding. "Yeah, that's Wendy's little brother. Do you like Michael?"

The boy considered for a second, and El added, "Or, we could shorten it. What do you think of 'Mike'?"

"Mike." The boy smiled. "Mike."

"Great! I'll call you that, then!" El grinned. She walked over to another box behind the mattress, pulling out some blankets. Mike watched as she started hanging them on hooks in the wall, making a small tent. "It's pretty easy to make a Blanket Fort, here, you see, Mike? When I was younger, I used to do this with Max all the time..." Her smile faded, as she remembered her missing friend. She took a deep breath, and turned around. "You can sleep in here. It's really comfortable, promise."

“Promise...” Mike repeated quietly, a little puzzled, then stood and started walking towards the tent, still holding *Peter Pan*.

“Wait!” El said, then ran back, picking up the box of clothes and holding it towards him. He looked down at it, confused. “You should get clean clothes on. You can pick whatever you want, my Dad won’t notice.”

The boy finally understood; unfortunately, he immediately put the book on top of the clothes and started to pull his hospital gown over his head.

“Ah!” El yelled, moving her hands over her eyes and letting the box clatter to the floor. “Don’t do that!”

She peered through, to see that the boy had stopped, looking confused.

“Uh, I really shouldn’t be here. You can change when I’m gone.”

Mike still seemed confused, so El picked the box up again and placed it in his hands. “I’m going to go to bed now. I’ll see you in the morning? Just stay here, alright?”

The boy paused, before saying quietly, “I need to go.”

“What? It’s raining out there!” El said. “And it’s the middle of the night! You need to stay here!”

“I need to find them.”

“Who?”

Mike fell silent again, looking down at the ground.

El sighed, and said, “What do you say we look for... for ‘them’ tomorrow? It won’t be raining then, and then we won’t get lost. We can go together, how’s that?”

“Together?” Mike asked.

El nodded, smiling. “Together.”

She held out her hand, and Mike hesitated, looking to her wrist and then to her face. He slowly moved one hand from the box and grabbed hers, shaking it. "Nice to make your acquaintance, Mike." She said.

Mike blinked. "El?"

"That's my name, don't wear it out." El smiled, before turning to go. "See you in the morning!"

As she left the boy, closing the door behind her, she stood in the empty hallway, put her head in her hands and screamed.

What the *hell* was going on?



## 6. Warning

### Notes for the Chapter:

Thank you all for your lovely comments! They really do make my day. :D

### CHAPTER SIX

#### *Warning*

“Morning, Dad.”

El looked up at her Dad as he came downstairs, passing a cup of coffee across the table.

“Morning, El.” Hopper said, noticing her tired expression. “You get any sleep last night?”

El shook her head. “Kept trying to call Max. Did you find anything else?”

Hopper hesitated, clearly not wanting to upset her more but not having anything else to say. “We’re talking to her family again today. See if they might be hiding anything, if there’s anyone they know who could want to-” he stopped, but El got the gist of what he was saying.

“Well, I guess this is more exciting than the cat in the street.” El said dryly, stabbing her fork into her Eggo.

“We’ll find her, El.” Hopper said,

El was getting really tired of hearing that. She glanced down at the table, trying to avoid her Dad’s gaze.

“Do you want to stay home from school today?”

Now *that* was finally something El wanted to hear. She struggled to

keep her expression blank as her Dad added, "I mean, you're a bit too tired and distracted to learn right now."

"I mean, sure."

"But only if you *stay home*. Don't leave unless I tell you to, got it?"

"Got it, Chief." El nodded, allowing herself a small smile. "I'll tell you if Max comes he-"

She froze, as over her Dad's shoulder, she could see the the figure of a boy, wandering down the hall and looking at the decorations. As she noticed her Dad start to turn, she put her legs on the table and kicked back, letting herself fall off the chair.

"Whoa!" Hopper shouted, standing up. El looked up briefly to see Mike turn the corner, and waited a few seconds before jumping up again. "What happened there?"

"Sorry, thought I saw a spider." El lied, laughing awkwardly. "You know how much I hate those."

"You alright?"

"Sure." El said. "But I think I'll definitely take a nap while you're gone, huh?"

The meeting with the Hargrove Family did not go well.

Mrs. Hargrove was probably the most helpful of them, saying that she was worried that her daughter hadn't made it home and emphasising that she would try to help the Search Party that would begin later that day. Mr. Hargrove kept insisting that he had no idea where his Stepdaughter was, suggesting that she might have been kidnapped by her biological father a few too many times, and Hopper really didn't like how much he was fixated on the "trouble" that Max was causing them by vanishing. And, of course, Billy was an asshole. He said that Max liked attention, and "probably just ran off to the next town over to give us a scare and see what we'll do."

The Search Party didn't go very well either. Even with about twenty adults who'd gathered to find the girl, all walking through the woods and calling for her, no other sign of her was found. And to top it all off, one of his idiot officers almost jumped off a cliff just to see if he could survive the fall.

And as if his day couldn't get any worse, Flo called in on the walkie-talkie. "Chief, you copy? Hey, Chief, we got a call from Benny's. I think you need to get there right away."

"Just doesn't make any sense, Chief."

Hopper stared ahead at Earl, one of Benny's friends, who had been brought into the Station for questioning. Benny Hammond had been found dead in his diner, a gunshot wound on the side of his head. By all accounts, it looked like a suicide.

"You, uh," Hopper questioned, holding out a lighter for Earl to use to light a cigarette. "Notice anything odd about him the last few weeks?"

"No," Earl denied. "We were fixin' to go fishing down the Etowah next Sunday. I mean, he was lookin' forward to it. I know that."

"He got any enemies you might know about?" Hopper asked. "I mean, people who might not want him around?"

Earl snorted. "The exes didn't like him, that's for sure, but, nah." He lifted up the cigarette to take another smoke.

"When was the last time you saw him?"

"Yesterday. Lunch, same as always."

"Just you and the boys?"

"Yep." Earl said. "Me and Henry and... well..." He stopped, thinking. "There was this, uh, kid." He shook his head to himself. "No kid did *this*."

“Kid?” Hopper looked up. “What’re you talking about?”

“Yeah,” Earl said. “At lunch, uh, there was this kid that, uh, I mean, he was trying to steal food out of Benny’s kitchen. Can you imagine that?”

Hopper looked to Officer Callahan, who was watching from the other desk, before turning back to Earl. “This kid, what’d they look like?”

“Well, he was about yea high. You know, tiny like.” Earl gestured. “I didn’t get a good look at him, though, he was back in the kitchen.”

“He look like this?” Callahan said, passing Earl a missing poster of Max that Hopper had made to be placed around town.

Earl shook his head vigorously. “Oh, no, that’s the skater girl. No, this was definitely a boy. This one had really short hair, I mean, it was buzzed nearly down to the scalp. And it was pretty dark, I don’t he had red hair.”

“Yeah, well, let’s forget about the hair.” Hopper said, pointing to the poster again, which had a large picture of Max, her hair flying in the wind, holding her skateboard like it was her baby. “If this girl shaved her hair off, could that kid be her?”

“Well, I didn’t get a good look at him. Benny thought he was bein’ shy.” Earl explained. “About the right height, though. Yeah, maybe.”

Nancy Wheeler wasn’t exactly sure what she was doing.

She really wanted to finish studying, honestly, how else was she going to get into College? But Steve was in front of her, with an excited look in his eyes, and he wanted her to go to a party. With him- and his asshole friends- that night.

“It’ll be low-key, it’ll just be us.” her boyfriend said, gesturing to him and his two friends- Tommy and Carol were giggling, obviously expecting good-girl Nancy to say no. “What do you say? Are you in, or are you out?”

Nancy glanced from him to her best friend behind her- Barb was looking blank, obviously waiting for Nancy to make her decision.

Before she could say anything, she heard Carol announce, "Oh, God. Look."

They all turned, to see a teenager behind them- Jonathan Byers, Nancy remembered. She'd seen him around town on occasion, and he was in her Math Class- or was it Chemistry? Someone had knocked his bag to the ground, and he was trying to gather up his spilled papers, as people passed by, kicking his books aside and stepping on his homework, nobody bothering to stop and help.

"Oh, God, that's depressing." Steve said.

"Should we help him?" Nancy asked.

"He's fine, this happens to him *all* the time." Tommy rolled his eyes. "It's kinda his thing."

"Yeah, I don't think he can afford a new bag." Carol said.

After a second, Nancy stepped away from the group, walking towards the teenager. She bent down, scooping papers up from the floor and handing them towards him. He looked up at her, with dark brown eyes that seemed almost *confused*. As if he didn't know what she was doing.

"Here you go." Nancy said awkwardly. "Did- did your bag rip?"

He nodded slowly, and she barely heard him mutter a "Yeah..."

"You should probably sew that up." she said, even more oddly.

"Yeah."

They stared at each other for a second, then Nancy heard footsteps behind her. She turned, half-expecting to see Barb, only to see Steve. He passed her a Chemistry book, and it took her a second to realize that it was Jonathan's. "Someone kicked this across the hall."

The book looked quite worn, obviously second-hand. Nancy passed it

to Jonathan, and said, “Um... hope your bag doesn’t rip again.”

Jonathan nodded and stood to go, just as the bell rung, signalling five minutes before the next class.

Nancy stood up, looking at Steve. He was doing that *thing* he did where he pretended he didn’t care what was going on, but she could tell he was worried about something.

“What time’s your party again?” Nancy asked, smiling.

“*Mike!*”

El waited until the door slammed and ran through the hallway, seeing the boy looking at the paintings hung on the wall. “Pretty.” he said simply.

“Yeah, I guess it is.” El said, before grabbing Mike’s arm and dragging him back up the stairs, to her room instead of the attic this time. She pulled him in and shut the door, saying, “What the *hell* were you doing?”

“Finding you.” Mike said.

“Finding *me*?” El asked, huffing.

Mike started looking around the room, his eyes going wide. He saw the pink-painted walls with bright green curtains, and ran his fingers across a bookshelf next to him. He smiled, looking at the numerous books, before walking to her bed and sitting on it, bouncing on the mattress.

“Mike, please, explain; why did you want to find me?” El crossed her arms and tried to look stern, learning very quickly that that was hard to do when Mike looked so *innocent*.

“El.” Mike said again, looking up at her, a small smile on his face.

“Yeah, that’s me.” El said, sitting next to him. “Mike, you shouldn’t have come down, I was gonna introduce you to Dad myself.”

Mike paused, looking up. “Dad?”

“Yeah, my Dad.” El said. “Chief Jim Hopper. He’s raising me.”

“Dad... here?”

“Of course he was here, he’s kinda gotta be.” El smirked. “If he just let me live alone, Child Services would be really pissed at him.”

Mike looked worried.

El sighed, then said, “Okay, here’s the plan. We’re gonna sit in the kitchen, and when Dad gets home, I’m gonna say you were lost, and he’ll call the nice people to-”

“No.”

Surprised, El looked at Mike; while his face was pretty passive, his eyes had a terrified look. “What?” El asked.

“No.”

“You don’t want to be found?” El asked.

Mike shook his head.

“Are you in trouble? Who are you in trouble with?”

“Bad.” was all Mike said.

“Bad? Bad people?” El asked. “They want to hurt you? The bad people?”

Mike looked to the door, then to El again. Slowly, he moved his hand into a gun shape, and pointed it at his own head. When El’s eyes widened in terror, he slowly moved his hand to her forehead, as well.

“Understand?”

## 7. Joyce

### Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, so after writing yesterday's chapter, and looking ahead at what I've got planned, I made a quick decision: from this point on, if there's a scene that will be too close to canon (ie, basically the same except swap "Will" with "Max"), I'm not going to write it. I'll reference it later, so you all know it happened, but I'm not going to transcribe an entire scene with added descriptions and inner thoughts just to swap out names.

As a result, Steve's party won't be shown. It will definitely be referenced- as Barb still disappears there- but since it would be completely identical to canon, there's no real reason to do it.

Thank you all again for your nice comments! I look forward to getting those every time I post something.  
:D

### CHAPTER SEVEN

*Joyce*

El stared at him in shock, and Mike turned to the rest of the room. He seemed to see something interesting, as he stood and slowly walked over to one of her bookshelves. El slowly started to follow him, and saw that he was looking at some photos of her. "Yeah, that's me." El said. "See, that one's me when I first got adopted, when I was almost three. There's Dad, we went camping that one time, see? And there's me, Nancy, and... and Max. We got A's in Math for like, the first time..."

She froze, as Mike, staring at the latter picture, slowly moved his hand and pointed to Max.



“Do you know her?” El asked, suddenly excited. “Do you know where she is? Did you see her yesterday?”

Mike simply stared.

The doorbell rang, and the world came rushing back to El. She jumped up and grabbed Mike’s arm, opening her closet door. “I think that’s Dad!” she said. “He must have forgotten something! Get in!”

Mike shook his head, a sudden terror in his eyes. “No!”

“Listen, if you don’t hide, he’ll find you!” El yelled. “I won’t let anything happen to you, I promise!”

“Promise?” Mike asked.

“It’s a vow, something you can’t break.” El explained. “And I *promise*, nothing bad is going to happen to you while I’m here.”

Mike looked her in the eyes, and nodded, stepping into the closet.

“I’ll be right back!” El assured him, and closed the doors.

The second the door closed, Mike started to panic.

*“Papa! PAPA!”*

*He was being dragged away, kicking, screaming, Papa behind him, watching with a blank disinterest. The guards would not drop him, would not let go. And Papa wouldn’t release him until his punishment was over.*

*“Papa!” He kept screaming, tears streaming down his face, as the guards walked towards the dark doors. “No, NO! NO!”*

*His protests falling on deaf ears, the doors were open and he was tossed in, closed and locked in within seconds.*

*“NO! PAPA!” He screamed, banging on the doors. “Papa! PAPA!”*

*No response. There’d be no response for hours, or days, however long his punishment was to last this time. He curled up in the corner, sobbing and*

*screaming, and all alone.*

“Mike?”

He looked up, and El was there, the door open. She kneeled down in front of him, looking worried. “Hey, sorry, it was just a makeup salesgirl. Are you alright?”

“Yes.” was all Mike said, though they both could tell that he was lying.

“Are you sure?”

Mike swallowed, trying to stop his tears. “Promise.”

El paused, before reaching up towards her shelf, and showing him the picture again, pointing to the redhead girl. “This is Max. Have you seen her? Do you know where she is?”

Mike nodded.

El looked relieved. “Where?”

“Outside.”

“Then let’s go!” El smiled.

Mike hesitated, and El’s smile faltered. She crawled up besides Mike, and put her hand over his. “Hey. We’ll be safe. I’ll protect you.”

Mike smiled, and grabbed her hand tighter. “Protect.” he repeated.

Hopper drove Earl home, dropping him off after only a few more questions about the mysterious boy in the diner. He certainly didn’t have any explanation for the sudden appearance of the boy, unless, of course, Max cut her hair, abandoned her skateboard, and decided to run away. But that seemed unlikely; Hopper was convinced that Max wouldn’t have left El with no explanation. The two girls were closer

than siblings, and Max's skateboard was more important to her than anything else; there was no way she'd leave it if she wasn't planning on returning later. Still, what other reason could there be for how the "boy" showed up the same day that Max vanished?

He intended to stop by the station for only a minute, to file some quick paperwork before returning to the rest of the Search Party. Unfortunately, once he walked into the building, Flo looked up from her desk and said, "Chief, you've got a visitor."

"I don't have time." Hopper said sharply.

"Too late." Flo shrugged.

Hopper didn't realize what she meant until he walked into his Office, and saw Joyce Byers sitting in front of his desk.

She looked up at him, a slightly worried look in her eyes. Hopper stopped for a second, surprised at her sudden appearance, before saying, "Hello, Joyce."

"Hopper." Joyce said. "How've you been?"

"Alright." Hopper moved to sit down behind the desk, trying to think. He hadn't talked to Joyce in a while, and he couldn't think of a reason she would be in his office.

Before he could ask, she spoke first. "I heard that today's been quite the interesting day."

"Who told you that?" Hopper asked.

"Henry was at the store after you interviewed him earlier today." Joyce explained. "He was... quite drunk."

"Of course he was."

"So let me get this straight," Joyce said. "A boy with a shaved head walked into Benny's Diner last night, and this morning Benny was found dead?"

Hopper sighed. "Listen, Joyce, it's nothing to worry about-"

“And one of the girls from the Middle School ran away?”

“Went missing. There’s no definitive evidence of what happened yet.” Hopper said. He picked up a crumpled-up Missing Poster from his jacket and passed it to Joyce. She looked at it for a second, looking very concerned. “Have you seen her?”

Joyce paused, still looking at the photo. “Joyce?”

She looked up, and said calmly, “I haven’t seen her, but I think I might have a lead for you on both your new cases.”

“How?”

Joyce glanced at the door for a second, then turned back to Hopper. “Do you know Hawkins Lab?”

The way she said the name stood out to Hopper. She sounded angry at the fact she was even mentioning the place, a fire flickering in her eyes. Joyce Byers was many, many things, but it took a lot to spark any *hatred* in her.

“Yeah, that old Scientists’ Hideout across the woods?”

Joyce looked him dead in the eye. “Start there.”

“Why? What’ve they got to do with it?”

Joyce started to say something, but stopped. After taking a second to think, she said, “Check there, and it’ll all make sense. That’s all I can... that’s all I can say here.”

“Joyce,” Hopper said carefully, “What do you know about that place?”

She stared him down, before standing up to leave. “Check there, Hopper. Then come talk to me.”

*The Day Before*

There was another boy in the woods, and he was running.

He had been running a lot lately. First through the halls of a building, lights flickering on and off and off and on. Then, he had run through the woods, from the same people twice, and then from that *thing*. The thing that had set them free, but was trying to hurt them. And it would hurt them, if it could catch them.

The boy ran some more, ducking only a second before a branch waved over his head; he thought he had left the Thing behind, but he couldn't tell without stopping. He wasn't about to stop. Besides, he'd *looked* enough lately, he didn't want to bleed any more today.

He finally slowed, upon approaching what looked to be a makeshift Shack ahead, in a small clearing. He carefully stepped towards it, looking it over. It was very amateurly done, with nails jutting out and uneven spacing between the sticks. However, it was small enough to hide in, and hiding was something the boy *really* wanted to do.

He curled up inside, staring ahead and wishing it would just be *over*. That all the Bad People would stop looking for him, that the Monsters would go away, that he and the others could just find somewhere to exist. Somewhere *alone*.

It was a few hours before he heard footsteps. He jumped, crawling into the back of the shack and curling up in the corner. He was hidden by shadows, but not very well. It definitely wouldn't deceive anyone who didn't have eye problems.

His eyes widened in terror as some kind of *animal* poked its head in, a tongue extended and eyes bright. It sniffed at him, moving to enter. The boy curled up, trying to make himself even smaller.

"Chester!" he heard a call, and the animal turned around, whining. "Chester, get back here!"

The animal vanished, but the boy didn't calm. A person was coming, coming *closer*. He could see his feet, approaching the shed. "What did you find? Some kind of squirrel or something?"

The boy had no choice. He had to know *now* if he could trust this

person. He closed his eyes and concentrated, focusing on the feet of the one who was about to lean down and look in and spot him. Slowly, he started to see the *glow* ; first, the animal started to light up, a bright white shine reflecting off his fur as he poked his head in again. The boy, however, had stopped looking at the animal; the person who was approaching now had his full attention, as his glow started to appear; a pale blue, the light moving around the air like waves of the ocean, flashing every now and again. It was different from what he normally saw; however, it reminded him of one thing.

*His aura.* The boy thought. *It's like mine.*

The person looked inside, eyes widening in shock as he registered the boy inside. "Whoa, kid, are you okay?" he said, after a second.

The boy stayed in the corner, still staring ahead.

The animal made a barking noise, and the person looked down at it, then back at the boy. "Did the dog scare you?"

*Dog.* He hadn't heard of a dog before. It didn't *look* dangerous.

"You can come out. Where are your parents?"

The boy shook his head wildly.

"You don't know?"

He shook his head again.

"Did you run away?"

The boy slowly started to approach the opening of the shack, crawling forwards. The dog wagged its tail and reached closer, licking the child's face. The boy stopped, shocked, and started to retreat a few steps.

"Chester, go home!" the person said, and the dog reluctantly trotted off. He turned back to the kid, leaning down. "I won't hurt you, kid." he said. "It's alright. My name's Jonathan Byers. What's yours?"

The boy didn't know what a "Jonathan Byers" was, but he knew one

thing: this person was *like* him, and he was *safe*.

He rushed out of the shack, jumping to his feet, as he let the lights go. The person stood up, too, and the boy walked up to him and gave him a tight hug around his legs.

“Whoa! O-okay.” The person sounded strange, as if he didn’t expect this. The boy didn’t blame him; he rarely got physical contact, too. “Wait, kid, are you hurt?”

The boy pulled away, looking up at Jonathan Byers. He’d been so excited to find a Safe Person, he’d forgotten about his nosebleed.

He forgot the other thing, too. He kept quiet, standing still and hoping that Jonathan Byers wouldn’t be too angry at him as the teenager’s eyes fell on the tattoo on the boy’s arm.

012.

## 8. One of the Others

### Notes for the Chapter:

I've been gone all day so I did like no editing for this chapter sorry if it's bad. Thanks again for being great! :D

### CHAPTER EIGHT

#### *One of the Others*

“Slow down, Mike! I can’t run *that* fast!”

Mike didn’t seem to hear her, so El just sighed and started pushing her legs to go farther. The boy seemed to know exactly where he was going, and El was starting to get her hopes up. Maybe he was hiding Max for some reason. Was she about to find her again? Would she be okay? Was-

Mike pushed a low-hanging branch out of his way, and as El followed, she found that he had stopped; the two of them had stopped in a small clearing, trees surrounding them in a circle of trampled grass, a single branch lying in the middle.

“Um... this is a very nice place, Mike.” El said, confused.

Mike shook his head, looking through the trees. El suddenly realized that he was looking... distressed? “Mike? Mike!” El called, and the boy eventually turned back to her. “Mike, what’s wrong?”

“Gone...” Mike said, his voice cracking. “The others... gone?”

“Others?” El asked.

“*Twelve!*” Mike started yelling, walking around the circle. “*Twelve! Ten! Nine!*”

“Mike, be quiet! There’s a search party out here, they might hear us!”



El warned.

“*Twelve!*” Mike kept yelling.

“Mike!” El screamed, grabbing him and dragging him back; the bushes were *moving*.

Mike fell silent, but pushed himself in front of El, shielding her from the view of whoever was in the bushes. El stood on her tip-toes to peer over his shoulder, wishing that she’d brought a baseball bat or *something* to fight with. After a second, she reached down and grabbed the branch from the ground, holding it tight and waiting.

Suddenly, out from the trees burst a small boy, about their age. He skidded to a stop a few feet in front of them, looking up and staring at the two kids already there. El still kept the branch, holding it up threateningly, until she saw Mike start to *run* at the other boy, throwing his arms around him and wrapping him in a tight hug.

El dropped the branch, scanning the new boy; he wore a similar hospital gown to what Mike was wearing when she found him, but he was slightly taller and had darker skin. His hair was also... well, it wasn’t *long*, but it wasn’t shaved to the scalp like Mike’s was. As El watched the two, she struggled to keep her face passive. Not only did she not *know* this boy, did she have *no idea* what was going on or who these kids were, but she had thought they were going to find *Max*. Where was Max? Had Mike even *tried* to find her?

After taking a moment to compose herself, she slowly approached them, and cleared her throat. The second boy saw her and slowly pulled away from Mike, glancing at him and then back at El. Mike slowly put a hand on his shoulder and shook his head, and the boy relaxed slightly, though he kept giving El a suspicious glare.

“It’s okay, I’m with him.” El said, gesturing to Mike.

The boy turned to Mike, who nodded. He pointed to the girl, and introduced, “El.”

El nodded, looking at the boy and holding out her hand. “El Hopper.”

The second boy looked to Mike, who grabbed his hand and attached

it to El's, directing him in how to shake. El laughed nervously, then asked, "And what's your name?"

The boy finally spoke, still looking suspicious. "Nine."

El blinked. "Oh, yeah, forgot about the number thing." She let go of Nine's hand, and gestured to Mike. "I've been, uh, calling *him* Mike."

Nine glanced to the boy. "M-Mike?"

Mike nodded, looking a little excited. "Mike! I'm Mike!"

"I could give you a name!" El suggested. "Maybe another *Peter Pan* character, we could have a theme! How do you feel about 'Peter'? 'John'?"

Nine simply looked at Mike, a "can you believe this?" expression showing. Mike looked around again, then asked, "Others?"

El's heart skipped a beat. "Others? Like Max? Is Max here?"

Nine looked confused. "Max?"

Her stomach dropped. So she really wasn't here. She probably shouldn't have gotten so excited, but *no*, Mike knew her, he pointed at her, he'd *seen* her, what were they *doing* here?

Her thought process was broken when Mike asked again, "Nine. Where is Ten? Where is Twelve?"

*Ten? Twelve?* So there were, what, *four* boys running around? El was starting to get really annoyed at the lack of an explanation here.

Nine looked down at his feet. "I don't know."

"Don't *know*?" El jumped; Mike sounded... angry? Afraid? It was hard to tell. "How?"

Nine eventually said, "They... they almost found us. Ten told us to split up."

Mike looked... terrified. El asked, "Who's they? The Bad People?"

But Mike didn't respond to her, instead talking to Nine again. "While I was gone?"

Nine nodded.

El could see that Mike was distressed at this news. Barely even knowing what she was doing, she walked forwards and put a hand on his arm, hoping that would be a comforting gesture. Mike looked at her briefly, then back to Nine. "Find them."

Nine shook his head. "Lots of people. Here."

*The Search Party.*

"You guys can still stay at my place." El said. "I can hide you."

Mike nodded, but Nine still glared. El got the feeling he didn't like her much. She gave him a weak smile, before reaching into her pocket and pulling out a photo of Max, one she'd brought with her in case they ran into someone else in the woods. She walked closer to Nine, who flinched at her approach, and showed him the image. "Have you seen her?" El asked. "Her name's Max."

Nine barely glanced at the photo before shaking his head, glaring up at El again. El turned to Mike, trying to keep herself from looking too angry or disappointed. "I thought we were looking for her."

Mike glanced at the ground, staring at his feet before saying, "Hiding."

"Hiding? Hiding where?" El asked.

Mike didn't respond, instead staring over El's head and right at Nine, his eyes searching for *something*. El looked between the two boys- one cautious, one sad- and said, "Well, do you know where she might be hiding?"

The boy sighed, and thought for a second. He then gestured for the two to follow him and started moving.

As they moved, El turned to Nine. "So, as for your name, what're things you like?"

Nine blinked at her. “What?”

“I named Mike after a drawing he thought was pretty.” she said. “Which was a drawing in a *Peter Pan* book.”

“Book?”

Did he *really* not know what a book was? She really needed more answers than she was getting. “Well, what kind of names do *you* like?”

Nine stared ahead at Mike, who was pushing aside branches and trying not to look back at them. He eventually shook his head. “Nine.”

El sighed. “Whatever you say. Mind telling me what’s up with you two while you’re at it?”

The boy gave her another glare and walked faster to keep up with Mike. El sighed and followed.

She tried to ignore Nine’s occasional glares, instead focusing on following Mike. That seemed to work, as she didn’t even notice when Nine closed his eyes and allowed his feet to follow the sounds of the forest, his mind drifting elsewhere.

“Nine.”

*The boy numbered “011” pointed at him, recognition in his eyes, remembering from a few days before. Nine nodded, responding, “Eleven.”*

*“Ten!” yelled the boy next to them, gesturing to himself, before pointing to the fourth and final boy. “That’s Twelve!”*

*Twelve stared at the ground, biting his lip and trying to make himself look smaller. He hadn’t exactly wanted to crawl through the vents with the other boys, but he wasn’t about to say “No.” It had been Ten’s idea; he wanted them all together. The adults didn’t seem to want them to talk to each other, but they were similar, right? Why shouldn’t they be together?*

*“Shh!” Nine said to Ten, glancing cautiously at the door. If someone passed by and heard them all talking to each other, heard them all in the same room ...*

*He turned back to Eleven, and said, “Show?”*

*Eleven blinked and held out his hand; as he did, a piece of paper hanging off of his wall flew to them, hitting Ten in the face as it passed. He giggled a little, while Twelve looked a little more startled.*

*“More?” Nine asked.*

*Eleven wiped his nose, and shut his eyes, and the paper floated into the air again, folding itself over and into a shape that was vaguely like a hand. He let the paper drop, falling to the ground, before turning back to the others.*

*“We... work harder?” Eleven asked them.*

*“Together.” Nine nodded, looking at everyone else. “We work harder together.”*

*Ten nodded first, beaming at the opportunity to be near those like him. Twelve was a little more hesitant. He shook his head slightly, pointing at the door.*

*“Won’t get caught.” Nine assured him, putting a hand on his shoulder. “We’re careful.”*

*Twelve kept his head down, trying not to look them in the eyes, but eventually did nod.*

*Eleven walked forwards, joining hands with Nine and Twelve, waiting until Ten grabbed the other hands and completed the circle. They looked at each other; they had not been alone together before. They’d never been alone with anyone but Papa and his workers for as long as they could remember; well, Nine could remember flashes, sometimes, but he wasn’t even sure those were real anymore. But now they were together, and they shared something. What they shared, they couldn’t put into their limited vocabulary, but they knew they were similar. There was something between them, and they were going to stay together, no matter what the adults said.*

*For most of them, it was their very first rebellion.*

*“Together?” Eleven asked.*

*“Together.” Nine replied.*

*“Together.” Ten repeated.*

*They all looked to Twelve- poor, quiet, sad Twelve- and he didn't say anything. He never said anything. He just nodded again, and they understood.*

“Okay, kid, I got something for you!”

The boy looked up, grinning as he saw a familiar pair of feet outside the shack. He crawled out and smiled up at the teenager, who leaned over and handed him a bag. The kid looked at it, confused, and then back at the teenager. After several moments, Jonathan realized the problem and grabbed the bag, opening it for him and showing him the chips inside. “It’s food.” he said. “The only thing I could sneak away today.”

The boy looked curiously up at him, as he picked up a chip and inspected it in the light.

“It’s not a problem, really. But I can’t get you much without someone noticing the food disappearing faster than normal.”

The smaller child looked up at him, sadness in his eyes. He started tapping on the sticks holding up the shed, and it took Jonathan a second to figure out what he was saying; it was a simple request.

- - - - ● ● ● ● ● ● - ● ● ● ● ● ?

Jonathan shook his head. “Sorry, bud. Didn’t find anything.”

The boy nodded slowly, his sadness showing on his face.

“Look, are you sure you don’t want me to go to the Cops? I’m sure they can help you find your family-”

The boy shook his head violently, his eyes widening.

“Okay, okay! But if you don’t want to live in my dumb old Fort, I can probably hide you somewhere in my house. My Mom probably won’t mind.”

He shook his head again. He didn’t want to risk someone with a Bad Aura finding him, but more importantly, he didn’t want Good People to be with him when the Bad People *did* track him down.

“So, what’s your name again?”

The boy pointed to his wrist tattoo.

“Right, Twelve. Who named you that?”

He shook his head and sat down in the grass, picking up the bag again and looking at the chips inside. He picked one up and crumbled it in his hands, scattering the crumbs to the ground.

“You don’t want to eat anything? How long’s it been since you’ve had food?”

The boy shrugged. He’d gone without food for *days* before, and the water bottle Jonathan Byers had given him yesterday was much more helpful. He could probably store the rest of the food for later.

“Oh! Almost forgot!” the teenager reached into his schoolbag and pulled out an oversized coat, handing it to the boy, who immediately dropped the chip bag and grabbed onto it, smiling widely. “I couldn’t find any clothes that would fit you, sorry about that, but I found my old coat in the back of my closet.”

The boy put it on, very excited about how *warm* it made him feel. The outside world was much colder than he thought it would be, and he could probably curl up completely under the coat for warmth if he needed to. He jumped, though, when he felt something *inside* the coat. He reached into a pocket, and pulled out two crayons: one blue, one red.

“Oh, sorry, I guess there’s some stuff in there.”

He pulled out a paper, the back of a receipt for some old game. His eyes immediately brightened, and he placed the paper against one of the sticks holding up the shack, taking a crayon in his other hand and starting to draw.

At first, it was just a few scribbles in the corner, to test what he could do. Then he started to draw more lines, quick strokes to make a circular shape, before he started the rest, adding more circles and lines and edges and shapes.

“Wow, you’re pretty good at that.” Jonathan said, and the boy jumped, surprised at the compliment. He turned, confused, which gave Jonathan enough time to see what he was drawing. “Is that one of your friends?”

The boy nodded, and after he added a few more lines of shading, marked the face with a number *011*.

It took him a shorter time to draw the others, as he’d gotten used to drawing against a branch. A quick *009* and a *010*, and he could feel Jonathan behind him, watching. “Is that what they look like?” he asked, and the boy nodded. “And those are their numbers? Why do you all have numbers?”

*Why don’t you?* The boy wanted to say, but he stayed silent, knowing that silence was safer. Silence was *always* safer. Jonathan moved to take the drawing, but the boy stopped him, holding out his hand for a second to block his reach. He moved to the last of the space on the receipt, and started to draw one last thing. Jonathan’s breath caught behind him as he saw the *inhuman* creature that the boy was drawing. Its face opened up like a flower, pointed teeth lining the inside, drool dripping from its face.

“What is *that*?” Jonathan asked.

The boy wasn’t sure why he’d drawn it at first, but he figured he should give the teenager a warning; if he was going to be in the woods a lot, he had to be looking for something else, too.

He didn’t have a name for it, so he simply wrote next to it, in shaky, messy, handwriting:



*MONSTER*

## 9. The Shed

### CHAPTER NINE

#### *The Shed*

“*Here?*”

El couldn't help her exclamation, shocked that Mike had led them *there*. The three kids were now outside her Dad's old shed, the door broken off its hinges, probably from some storm or another, and she noticed another major difference from the last time she'd been there: the door was blocked with Police Tape. “Why would Max be here?”

Nine looked confused as well, probably for different reasons than El, but Mike just gave them both quick glances before ducking through the police tape and walking inside the shed. El ran after him, thinking that if Max were there, she'd be more likely to come out if she saw her there. “Max?”

She looked around; everything looked much cleaner than she recalled, and she didn't exactly remember the Police Tape around certain areas. “Why are we *here?*” she asked Mike, turning to him.

“Max.” he replied, still looking around the shed in confusion. She assumed he didn't know what most of this stuff was.

Nine finally made it through the tape, glancing around with a blank face. “This place is busy.” he managed to say.

“Max *isn't* here!” El said, her temper flaring. “Look at all this Police Tape, Mike! That means the officers were *here*, and they would've found Max!”

“Hiding.” was all Mike said.

“Hiding from the cops? Why?” El asked.

“Not from them.” Mike shook his head.

“From *who*?”

Mike paled, and El caught a flash of fear in his eyes. “Mike...?”

The boy stepped back a little, staring ahead. In a flash, Nine ran forwards, grabbing Mike by the arm and helping him sit on an old chair. “What’s going on-?” El asked, but Nine shot her a glare to shut her up.

El took a deep breath, looking around the shed. “She’s not here. We better go home.”

Nine immediately looked up, shaking his head in fear. “Not home.”

“N-not your home,” El said, though she still wasn’t sure where *their* home was. “Mine. My Dad’ll still be out, and nobody will be at our house.”

Nine gave her another glare, standing up and moving in front of her. It might have been El’s imagination, but the room suddenly seemed darker, as if the lights had all dimmed simultaneously. “Who are you?” he said.

El tried to make herself look taller, not wanting to seem intimidated. “El Hopper. I told you.”

Nine looked very darkly at her, and after giving Mike another glance, said, “Will you protect him?”

“What?”

“Protect.” Nine said again. “From the Bad Men.”

*What the hell have I gotten myself into?* El asked. She, at first, wanted to respond with questions, ask who the Bad Men were, ask who Nine and Mike were, why they were running, why they were being *hunted*, but before she could, she got a glimpse of Mike from over Nine’s shoulder. He was still staring at the wall, tears growing in his eyes. He looked so *small*, and *scared*, and El felt *something* for him. She didn’t know if it was pity, sympathy, compassion, but she also remembered how happy he’d been to see something pretty, to have a name that wasn’t a number, and how scared he’d looked when he

was alone. He looked alone now.

She knew one thing, one important thing: she didn't want him to be alone.

"Yes."

Nine gave her another look, one that was still doubtful, but ultimately, the boy decided that he could afford to take the chance. "Then we'll go."

At that point, the room felt brighter. Maybe it was. What El didn't notice was Nine wiping blood away from his nose on his long sleeve as he went to help Mike to his feet. She also didn't notice, as she and Nine helped a still terrified Mike through the Police Tape, the lights start to flicker again.

Mike started talking about halfway through the forest. "El?" he said quietly.

The two kids were on either side of him; he'd started walking with them, but they were a little worried that at any moment he'd topple over.

"Yeah, Mike?" El said, looking to him. "Are you okay?"

Mike bit his lip and stared at the ground, nodding.

El narrowed her eyes. "Mike, Max and I have a rule, the one rule we've never broken in all the years we've been friends."

Mike and Nine both looked to her, puzzled and curious.

El continued, "Our rule is 'Friends Don't Lie.' And you, Mike, are *not* okay right now."

"Friends?" Mike asked, sounding the word as if it was foreign to him.

"Yes, Friends. We're friends." El said.

“What is ‘friend’?” Nine asked, still sounding wary.

*How on earth do they not know what a “friend” is? Where have they been living?* “Well, a- a friend...” El struggled, trying to figure out how to describe a word she’d known for most of her life. “It’s someone you’d do anything for, you make them feel better when they’re down, you keep them away from bullies, and you never break a promise.”

“Promise.” Mike nodded slowly, remembering the word. He then turned to Nine, a slight smile on his face, and pointed at him. “Friend.”

Nine looked surprised, but nodded. “Friend.”

Mike turned back to El, and asked, “Are we friends?”

El smiled and nodded, though she got a glimpse of Nine giving her a glare from behind Mike. “Yes. We’re friends. And friends don’t lie.”

She stopped for a second, which surprised the boys, who had to turn to look at her. “Friends don’t lie, Mike. What happened back at the Shed?”

Mike took a deep breath, looking between Nine and El. He still looked scared, a little... guilty? El wasn’t good at reading expressions, but that was usually the look Max got when she realized she was late somewhere, or in trouble, or she’d done something bad. But there was no reason Mike should feel guilty, right?

Finally, Mike said, “Max... hiding.”

“Yeah.” El prompted, hoping for more.

Mike looked again between the other two; Nine was looking very annoyed at El, but gave Mike more careful looks; El could tell just from that there was some kinship between them, something they both went through.

Finally, Mike spoke. “We’re hiding.”

“From the bad men? Are they the ones who have Max?”

The boys looked to teach other again, and Nine put a comforting hand on Mike's shoulder. Mike finally said, "Hiding from the Other Side."

He said nothing else until they returned home.

Hopper knocked on the door, and Joyce Byers answered.

Before she could even say anything, Hopper started to explain. "We found part of some fabric in a tunnel leading to the Lab."

Joyce looked outside quickly, as if searching for more people around. She gestured for him to come inside, and the second he did, she closed and locked the door, turning around. "What else?"

Hopper continued, still very confused at how *angry* she looked, and honestly he was a little concerned at how paranoid she was starting to look. "We went into the Lab, asking if they'd seen Max. They showed us security tapes, but they were clearly faked; there wasn't any rain in the footage, even though there was a pretty big storm that night. So the Officers and I went to the Library to see what we could find out about the Lab. And we found this."

Hopper reached into his pocket, and pulled out a newspaper clipping that he may or may not have snuck out of the library. He pointed to the picture; it featured a doctor, named Brenner, standing with several of his "patients" from some experiment called MKUltra. And one of the patients was a much younger Joyce.

"Mind explaining what's going on?" he asked.

Joyce stared at the photo, before taking it from him and turning to go. "Follow me."

## 10. Conspiracies

### CHAPTER TEN

#### *Conspiracies*

“Good God, Joyce.”

Hopper stared in pure disbelief. Joyce had led him to a small Office room, only to take a chalkboard off the wall and flip it over, hanging it back up to reveal a large, crowded Conspiracy Map, string connecting scraps of paper and charred photographs and no recognizable order of things.

“This,” Joyce said, gesturing to her Map and turning back to Hopper, “Is twelve years worth of dirt on Hawkins Lab.”

“Twelve years?” Hopper asked. “What happened twelve years ago?”

“From what I can gather,” Joyce pointed at a photograph in the top right corner, blatantly ignoring Hopper’s question. “This Lab began sometime after World War II, but it didn’t really get anywhere until the early 50’s, when they started running experiments on human subjects...”

“Where did you get all of this?”

Joyce waved her hand. “Oh, some of it’s mine, some of it’s from old papers I found in my Dad’s basement, some of it I grabbed while no one was looking.”

Hopper glanced around the room. It all *did* look like a normal office, only part of a light fixture on the far wall looked like it could be a door hinge, and all the windows had been covered up, the door behind them locked. “So, you’ve got this Conspiracy Room on Hawkins Lab- *specifically* Hawkins Lab- and you’ve been hiding this all from everyone for... what’d you say again?”

“Twelve years.” Joyce repeated. “Nobody believed me the first three,

so when Jonathan and I moved back here, I kinda stopped mentioning it to people. Also, it's not like I want to openly talk shit about a government-protected secret lab while they're basically across the street."

She glanced at Hopper, smiling a little, and said, "You may want to pull up a chair. This could take a while."

Hopper silently did as she said, still a little intimidated by what Joyce had pulled together.

"So, the experiments started and went on until the early seventies." Joyce explained, pinning up the clipping she'd taken from Hopper in-between two hastily scribbled notes. "They were... not pleasant."

"You took part in them?"

Joyce nodded. "Not a part of my life I like to talk about. Here's the thing, though, even after the experiments stopped, the Lab was still running. They never really explain what it is they still *do*."

"And you think you know?" Hopper guessed.

"The experiments didn't stop. They just switched subjects."

Hopper wasn't exactly convinced; Hawkins Lab was still a Government-mandated workplace, and after the MKUltra scandal, he doubted that they would still get funding for that sort of thing.

"Here's where your mysterious boy in Benny's Diner comes in." Hopper looked up, as Joyce continued. "I believe he, and possibly other children, were abducted and have been used for experimentation purposes."

"That's... quite an accusation."

Joyce rolled her eyes and walked to a dresser against the wall, opening up a drawer and throwing books aside. Hopper stood and walked over, as she opened up a false bottom and grabbed a stack of papers, pulling them out and handing them to him.

"When did you install that?" Hopper eyed the false-bottomed drawer;



making those wasn't exactly a household skill.

"When I moved in. Check out the papers."

Hopper looked down, skimming through the first few papers on the top of the pile; *Cleveland Teen Girl Missing from Indiana*, *Baby boy abducted from County Hospital*, *Vanished! Indian Girl Missing in London*. A lot of child abductions, of children of varying age, ethnicity and gender. He looked up at Joyce. "So... you've been studying child abductions."

"These are the children I think those bastards in the Lab kidnapped." Joyce said. "If you see here, this girl's mother died several years before, and I believe she was a participant in the Experiments. This one?" She pulled a paper out from the stack. "This boy's mother was in my group--"

"Hold on, hold on, Joyce." Hopper said. "Are you saying that the boy who was seen with Benny escaped from Hawkins Lab?"

"That's exactly what I'm saying." Joyce nodded. "They ran experiments on him, and he finally got out. Benny was killed for knowing too much."

"That seems like quite a stretch." Hopper said.

"A *stretch*?"

"Well..." what exactly do you say to that? "I mean, are you *sure* this-" he gestured from the stack of papers that she'd grabbed from him, to the Conspiracy Board up on the wall, "Is all accurate? Are you sure the Lab doesn't just do normal Chemistry stuff?"

"You were *inside* it!" Joyce yelled, throwing the papers onto a desk and crossing her arms. "Did it look like that kind of Lab to you?"

No.

"And what's this *kidnapping kids* thing?" Hopper said. "How would you even piece *that* together?"

That's when Joyce gave him a *look*, a glare so fierce it almost *shook*

him, an anger so deep that he knew instantly he had crossed some kind of line.

Thankfully, in that moment, they heard the outside door open.

Joyce paused, going to the room's door and listening. After a second, they heard a muffled, "Hey, Mom?"

She sighed with relief and opened the door slightly; Hopper noticed that she was still blocking him and the board from view. "Hey, Jonathan. How was school?"

"Um, it was fine, I was just gonna go out, some of the teenagers have a study group going and I wanted to see if they needed any help..."

As Joyce started talking, Hopper turned again to the Conspiracy Board, approaching it this time and looking at all the clippings.

There was certainly a lot of information she'd gathered; dates of events happening around the Lab, workers who'd retired or gone missing, some "MKUltra" shit here and there. After a second, though, he found something that really caught his interest.

A photo of a man, labelled "Brenner"- a name that Hopper recognized from both the Lab and the clipping he'd received- was connected to a single notecard, with one name, written in shaky handwriting. One name that seemingly had nothing to do with the rest of the Board.

*Will.*

The door closed, and Joyce turned back to Hopper. "So, are you going to hear me out, or should we pretend this never happened?" she asked, her arms still crossed and her eyes fixated on the ground.

Hopper sighed, glancing from the Board to the door. Eventually, he said, "If Max is in that Lab, what do you think they're doing to her?"

Joyce looked up at him. "We might be here a while."

"Shit, I haven't given you any *food*!"

Nine and Mike looked up from the Blanket Fort that they had finally settled in, both with a confused look.

“You probably haven’t eaten in *days*, and we were running around the woods!” El said. “I’ll go make something for you to eat, and Mike, you can give Nine some new clothes. Do you guys like Eggos?”

They still looked blank.

“I can make them into a sandwich. Like, fold them over and slap some peanut butter in. Max says I’m the only one who could possibly like it, but you guys will probably disagree, right?”

They still stared at her.

“Alright, I’ll be right back. Stay here.” El smiled, before she left them in the attic.

The kitchen was pretty messy, as neither El nor Hopper liked cleaning that much. El had throw aside a couple of empty Eggo boxes in order to find one that actually had waffles inside, and set two in the toaster while she went to grab some peanut butter. As she did, she heard the phone ring. She froze, and it took her a second to realize why she was panicking.

*Dad never fixed the phone.*

El crept towards the place where she’d abandoned the broken phone the day before; it was still on the ground, the cord snapped, the phone dead. But it still rung.

“What the hell...” she muttered, and slowly reached down, picking up the phone and putting it to her ear. “Hello?”

At first, she heard nothing. As she was about to put the phone back and question her own sanity, she heard breathing.

“Max?” she called instantly. “Max!”

The lights flickered, and El dropped the phone before it could burn her again.

She stood, staring down at the phone on the ground and breathing deeply, until she heard the toaster pop.

## 11. Lost Kids

### CHAPTER ELEVEN

#### *Lost Kids*

“Hey, I’ve got to go to school today, okay?”

Mike and Nine gave her puzzled looks, obviously not understanding what she was saying. Beneath them were two plates El had brought up. She’s given the boys more Eggos-and-Peanut-Butter that morning; Nine didn’t seem to like it much, and seemed disappointed when she brought him another plate that morning. Mike, however, appeared to love it, and had already eaten his, reaching to grab Nine’s, as he didn’t look like he wanted it.

“I’ve got to go for about eight hours, and I’ll be back and then we can talk and try to find Max again.” El said.

“Go?” Mike asked, looking worried.

Nine narrowed his eyes at her. “Safe?”

“Yes, you’ll be safe. Dad never comes up here, and the only ones who have keys to our house are him, me, and Max. If Max comes, you make sure she stays here til I get back, okay?”

“You’ll be back?” Mike looked quite nervous, as if he expected her to ditch them and never return.

“Of course.” El nodded. “Very soon. Just stay here and don’t destroy anything, okay?”

“Promise?” Mike asked, apparently not noticing Nine glaring at him.

El smiled at him, reaching over and grabbing his hand. “Promise.”

Mike glanced down at her hands in his, his face going a bit red. El smiled again and stood up, grabbing her schoolbag off the floor. “I’ll

be back *very soon*.” she said.

The second she was gone, Nine turned to Mike. “What does she know?”

“Nothing.” Mike looked down at his feet, trying to avoid his eyes.

“Nothing?”

Mike nodded.

Nine sighed, looking up at the ceiling. “Is she safe?”

“Yes.” he said, a little too quickly.

“Are we safe?”

Mike gave him a sad look. “Never.”

Nine knew that, but he had still hoped there might be a different answer. After a second, he said, “Dark.”

He waved his hand slightly, and the room brightened. Mike smiled a little, and gestured for Nine to follow him; he wanted to show him the books he’d found. Nine wiped his nose on his sleeve and slowly followed.

“Ready to go?” Hopper asked, as El walked down the stairs.

El nodded, glancing down at the floor.

“I’m going to be out all day, so if you need anything, use the normal channel.”

“Looking for Max?”

Hopper paused. “Yes. Joyce Byers thinks she has a lead, and we’re going to try and-”

“Joyce Byers?” El asked. It took her a second to remember her name; she was the cashier at the general store. Dad had gone to school with

her, she thought, but she mostly remembered how nice Joyce was to everyone. “What lead has she got?”

“We’re looking into it, I’ll tell you if it turns out alright.” Hopper said, as he opened the door for her. “And, El?”

“Hmm?”

“Try not to bike home alone today.”

El gave him a look. “Who am I supposed to bike home *with*? Jennifer Hayes? Dad, I’ll be fine.”

Hopper crossed his arms. “El. I’m not having you disappear on me, too. We don’t need more missing kids.”

*Well, we’ve got two missing kids in the attic.* El wanted to say, but that would be a really bad idea, so she just sighed. “I’ll try, Dad. See you tonight.”

School wasn’t fun.

Well, it was never really *that* fun, but it was somehow worse without Max. The other kids tended to ignore El; they were either worried that the Sheriff’s daughter would rat them out for doing anything slightly immoral, or laughed at her every time she asked someone if they were interested in forming a DnD party, or going to the arcade, or if they’d read the new fantasy book. Max was really the only one her age who actually seemed to give a shit about her, and all day El had to stare at her empty desk and hear teachers talk to the class about how no, there was no news about Max, and yes, they were all looking, and who to talk to if they had information, and El was getting *sick* of all the looks she was getting. Often kids would give her pitying looks, somehow worse than the ones she usually got. Sometimes she even got suspicious glares that reminded her a lot of Nine, usually accompanied with whispers that maybe she’d killed her and buried her body in the woods. El didn’t try to talk back to them; what was she supposed to say to that? She usually stared at the wall while the teacher talked, picked at her lunch while she sat alone, and

kept her head down in the halls.

It was after school was finally over, and El was packing up her stuff to go home, when Troy and James tracked her down.

“Hey, golden girl!” Troy said from behind her in the hall, and El groaned. “We heard that Red went and died in the woods somewhere.”

“She’s not dead, asshole.” El said simply, slinging her bag over her shoulder and shutting her locker. She refused to look him in the face, instead starting to walk towards the exit, pushing past the other kids.

“Did she skip town, then?” James asked, moving up next to her. “What’d she do? Did *she* kill someone?”

“Piss off.” El said.

“Oh, the golden girl wants to be left alone, then?” Troy moved to the other side of her, and El realized in a flash that they were surrounding her. “Touchy subject? A little upset that your girlfriend dumped you?”

El stopped dead in her tracks, and turned to glare at the taller boy. “You know what, Troy? Max isn’t here. Do you know what that means?”

Troy smirked. “What?”

“It means you can’t blame her for this.” El said, then jumped forwards and punched him in the face.

She heard James gasp, and the students around her let out surprised noises. El immediately turned to go, only to barely dodge James, who was running at her, and trip over his feet, sprawling onto the ground.

“You’re dead, golden girl.” Troy said, standing up, as El whipped around.

“El?”

They all looked up, and El let out a grin. Nancy Wheeler had passed



through the crowd of kids, and was standing in front of them all, her arms crossed and feet planted on the ground. The sixteen-year-old Highschooler immediately stood out among the crowd of middle schoolers, and El could hear Troy and James jump to their feet, trying to look more innocent.

“Hey, are you alright?” Nancy asked, walking forwards and holding out her hand. El grabbed it and let the teenager help her up. “Looks like you took a spill.”

“Yeah, guess I’m a bit of a klutz.” El shot a look over her shoulder at the two bullies, a glare that simply said *We’ll finish this later*. She knew that the bullies weren’t going to do anything in front of Nancy- they didn’t act like the assholes when they were in front of anyone who could possibly get them in trouble- and she reveled in their panicked looks.

“Well, if you’re ready to go...” Nancy said, and El saw her glance at the other kids. Now that she thought of it, why *was* Nancy there?

“Yeah, let’s go.” El smirked, and followed Nancy out of the school.

“You want me to do something about those mouthbreathers?” Nancy asked, as the two of them walked down the sidewalk.

El was dragging her bike alongside her, and briefly looked up from it. “Huh?”

“The two assholes who tripped you. Are they the ones who broke Max’s skateboard last month, too?”

“They’re just attention-seekers.” El said. “Max and I try to ignore them.”

“Does that work?”

El paused, before saying, “There’s nothing else we can do. The teacher said she’d expel Max if she punched the boys again.”

They walked in silence, before El asked, “So, why are you here?”

“Your- well, your Dad asked me to walk you home.” Nancy admitted. “He says he knows you can take care of yourself, but with Max going missing and everything...”

“Yes, I know.” El rolled her eyes. “Do you know anything about where Max might’ve gone? Are you sure she didn’t stop by your house, or-”

Nancy shook her head. After a second she said, “Actually, I wanted to ask you something.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. I couldn’t ask your Dad, because I just kinda ran into him on the way to school and him and Ms. Byers seemed really busy-”

“Ms. Byers?”

“I was just wondering, if you could talk to him, if he could ask Max’s search party... well, if they could look for Barb, too.”

El blinked up at Nancy. “Barb?”

“She’s, uh, my friend from school.” Nancy said. El still seemed confused, so she reached into her jacket pocket and pulled out a picture; it was of her, next to a taller, red-haired girl with thick glasses. “Barbara Holland. We went to a... a thing last night, and she’s missing. I haven’t heard from her all day and her Mom doesn’t know where she is, and...”

“Do you think she’s with Max?” El asked.

“I don’t know how they would know each other, but she can’t have gone far.” Nancy admitted, taking the picture back from El and returning it to her pocket. “And if Max is still in the woods, maybe they ran into each other? I don’t know, it’s dumb...”

“No, it’s not.” El said. She looked up; they were nearing the edge of town, meaning that they were nearing her house. “I-I’m sorry about your friend.”

“I’m sorry about yours.” Nancy said.

They kept walking until they reached El's front porch. As El tied her bike outside, she heard Nancy say, "There was something else, too."

"What?"

"Well..." she sounded worried. "I don't know how to say this, but... I went to the place I last saw Barb, and I thought I saw *something* in the woods."

El froze. "Wh-what sort of thing?"

"I don't know, maybe a bear? It was hard to tell, but it just seemed... *wrong*, you know?"

El ran up to Nancy and threw her arms around her in a hug. Caught off guard, it took Nancy a second to return it. They only embraced for a second, before El pulled away. "I, uh, should be getting inside. I've got homework and stuff. Good luck with Barb."

"Good luck with Max." Nancy said. "I'll keep the channel open in case you need me, okay?"

"Got it." El smiled.

As Nancy turned to go, El slowly reached into her own pocket, dropping inside it the picture of Barb.

Her Dad probably shouldn't have taught her how to pickpocket.

## 12. Meeting

### CHAPTER TWELVE

#### *Meeting*

“Alright, Joyce, what are we doing?”

Hopper had met up with Joyce at her store, where she had very simply informed him that she’d taken the day off and handed him a box to carry. After he’d seen Nancy and asked her to make sure El got home alright, the two adults had gone back to the Byers’ house, where Joyce had dropped the boxes on her couch, gone into the Office Room again, and started tossing papers onto the floor in piles.

“Sorting the evidence. Get the door?” Joyce said.

Hopper shut the door and, after a second, locked it; he figured that was what she meant, anyway. “What’s this for?”

“If we get enough of this together,” Joyce explained. “We can build a case against the Lab; first, though, we have to figure out what we’re missing. There’s *something* that I’m *missing*...”

Hopper still wasn’t entirely sure what to believe about this whole mess. True, Joyce had never shown any signs of insanity in all the years he’d known her, and the Lab was being incredibly suspicious in trying to hide any involvement in Max’s disappearance. However... it was still pretty weird to hear that the scientists across the Forest were hiding kids kidnapped by MKUltra test subjects in order to continue the experiments. And he was pretty convinced Joyce was hiding several things from him.

Eventually, he asked, “And how is this going to help Max?”

It took Joyce a second to respond. “When all this is revealed, the Lab will have to cover themselves up. They’ll be under investigation, and from what I remember about Max trying to skate her way through the General Store and knocking over five shelves in the process, if

she's there, she will make herself be found."

"And if this doesn't work?"

"It has to."

Hopper figured there was probably a lot of other things they could try, but he didn't have any suggestions at the moment. So he kneeled down next to her to help look through the evidence she'd compiled.

There was certainly a lot of it. This could take a while.

"Hey, boys!" El called, as she pushed the trapdoor open, rushing up the ladder. "I'm coming in, I've got a question for you!"

As she walked in, she saw Mike burst out of the Blanket Fort, a grin on his face. Nine slowly followed, giving El his normal glare.

"I brought more food! This time it's a normal sandwich, no Eggos." El said as she closed the trapdoor, pulling said sandwiches out of her bag. "But we really need to talk right now."

"Find the others?" Nine asked, as Mike grabbed both sandwiches moved to sit on the floor; the others joined him quickly.

"Uh, yeah, pretty soon. But first, I wanna know-"

"You're hurt."

El blinked, confused, as Mike reached forwards and touched her cheek; El suddenly realized that she had a bruise.

"Oh, uh, that's fine. I fell down." she said.

Mike looked sadly at her, and said, "El."

"Yeah?"

"Friends don't lie."

El sighed. "Look, some mouthbreather tripped me. It's no problem."

“Mouthbreather?” Lucas asked.

“You know, a jerk. An idiot. An asshole.”

“Asshole?”

El shook her head. “Look, it doesn’t matter, Troy and James are just dicks who won’t go anywhere in life. I just want to know if you can help me find someone.”

Mike froze, looking a little worried, as El pulled out the picture of Barb that she’d swiped from Nancy. She pointed at the redhead girl and asked, “Have you seen her?”

Mike looked at the picture, his expression puzzled. He shook his head and turned to Nine, who shrugged.

“Her name’s Barb, she went missing, too.” El explained, her heart sinking. “I was hoping she was hiding with Max.”

Mike shook his head.

“Okay,” El sighed, putting the picture down on the floor. “How about Max?”

The boys stiffened and glanced at each other.

“Are you going to tell me where she’s hiding?” El crossed her arms.

“Shed.” Mike said quietly.

“She *wasn’t there*.” El reminded him. “If she was there, she would have told us.”

“She couldn’t.” Mike said.

“Why not?”

“*Hiding*.”

El sighed. “From *what*?”

The boys looked at each other again.

“From the Bad Men? What do they want with her?”

Mike shut his eyes and grabbed Nine’s hand, squeezing it. El’s eyes widened; she recognized *this* from what had happened to him at the Shed.

“Nine? What’s wrong with him?”

Before Nine could answer, El heard the front door slam.

They all froze, and El shut her eyes and took a deep breath. *I didn’t lock the door.*

Steps were coming upstairs, and she heard more doors open and close. Someone was looking for someone. Her? Or...

She turned to the boys. Mike was starting to panic again, curling into a ball and staring in horror at the trapdoor. Nine jumped to his feet, his hands out, preparing to face whoever it was. El simply tried to keep breathing normally, tried to stay *calm*. The boys needed her to stay calm.

The trapdoor dropped open, and the rope ladder fell with it. After a second, someone popped her head in the room.

“El, you little shit, did you *pickpocket* me? I need that pict-”

Nancy froze, staring at the three very worried children, two of which were total strangers.

“El... what the *hell* is this?”

“Uh...” El said, as she noticed Nine start walking towards Nancy, still looking defensive. “Whoa! Nine, it’s okay, she’s a friend. Nancy, why don’t you... come on in?”

Nancy slowly climbed in, leaving the trapdoor open, her eyes scanning the boys. Nine gave her his normal glare, eventually retreating to stand in front of Mike. Nancy’s eyes drifted to the other boy as he did this, and she met his eyes. For a second, they simply stared at each other; however, that didn’t last long, as she crossed her arms and said, “El, mind explaining why you’ve got two boys in your

attic—" She spotted the sandwiches. "Are they *living* in here?"

"Uh, yeah." El said, slowly standing up. "They're on the run."

"*What?*"

"From Bad People who want to kill them. Their names are Nine and Eleven, but I've been calling Eleven 'Mike' for a while now."

"*Nine and Eleven?*" Nancy asked. "What are they, Russian Spies?"

"I don't... think so?" El said. "But, uh, Mike thinks he knows where Max is, if I can just get it out of him."

"Does your Dad know he's got two boys living in his attic?"

"No, and you're *not* going to tell him." El said sharply. "Mike says if the Bad Men know where we are, they'll..."

She paused, forming a finger gun, and pointing it at Nancy. Her tutor simply swatted her hand down, and said, "This is *insane*, El. How do you know they aren't crazy?"

"They're helping me find Max." El's voice shook a little. "I trust them."

"Trust?" Nine asked under his breath, apparently not recognizing the word.

"Here's what I'm going to do, El." Nancy said, her voice turning authoritative. "I'm going downstairs, and I'm going to call your Dad, and we're going to deal with these boys, and then they'll go home."

"No, no! Nancy!" El said, as Nancy turned and walked towards the open trapdoor.

Suddenly, the trapdoor slammed itself shut.

The girls stared, and Nancy reached forwards, opening the trapdoor again.

It once again slammed shut, barely missing her fingers as it did.



Nancy and El slowly turned to the boys. Nine was staring at Mike, who had stood, and now had blood flowing out of his nose. Nancy reached for the trapdoor one more time; Mike waved his hand, and a box flew out, landing on top of it.

Mike turned, and gave Nancy a dark glare. He then said one, single word:

“No.”

## 13. The Body

### Notes for the Chapter:

Who's ready for some angst on this fine Wednesday morning?

### CHAPTER THIRTEEN

#### *The Body*

*So, this is new.*

The three children and teenager sat in a circle, as El finally said, “So, Mike, you didn’t tell me you were a mutant.”

“Not a nice thing to say.” Nancy whispered.

“Says ‘what are they, russian spies?’” El whispered back.

Mike stared at the floor. Eventually, El said, “It’s not bad, Mike. I think it’s cool.”

“Cool?” Mike asked.

“Cold?” Nine guessed.

“No, no.” El said. “It means, well, awesome. Sweet. Interesting.”

“Cool...” Mike muttered to himself.

“So, you can... move things?” Nancy asked, getting them back on topic. “With your mind?”

Mike paused, before hesitantly nodding. He slowly reached up his hand, and a book flew out of the blanket tent, moving forwards and resting at El’s feet. She looked down: *Peter Pan*.

“Really shoulda called you Peter.” El mumbled. “I bet you can fly. Can you fly?”

Mike looked worried, shaking his head.

“And you?” El turned to Nine, smiling brightly. “Can you move things?”

Nine shook his head.

“Do you have... other powers?” Nancy hesitated before asking.

Nine paused, looking at Mike. He seemed... scared. El didn’t blame him, honestly. “Look, you can trust us.” El said. “I’m not going to tell the Bad Men about you.”

“Trust?” Nine asked again.

“It means...” El paused. “It means you *know* that something is going to happen. You *know* that it’s safe here; you can *trust* that I’ll keep you safe.”

Nine still looked wary, but Mike grabbed his hand, smiling slightly at him and nodding. After a second, Nine shut his eyes, and the room around them started to darken, until El could barely see in front of her. Suddenly, the light started flooding back, until it started to hurt her eyes. She saw that both Nine and Mike had their eyes shut, and she joined them, not wanting to blind herself. After a second, she squinted, and saw that the room had returned to normal.

“You control light?” Nancy guessed.

Nine nodded, staying quiet.

El suddenly jumped, realizing that both boys now had strong nosebleeds. She glanced around the room to see if there was a tissue box, only for the boys to quickly wipe the blood away with their sleeves.

“So... you two have superpowers? Is that why the ‘Bad Men’ are looking for you?” Nancy said, and the boys gave each other a meaningful look, which told the two girls all they needed to know. “Are they your parents?”

There was silence for a while, as the boys contemplated their answer.

Finally, Mike said, "There's Papa."

He said the word with such a shaky voice that El surmised quite quickly that Papa wasn't the nicest Father in the world.

"And you use these powers to... spy on the US?" Nancy asked.

"They're not Russian Spies, dipshit!" El groaned. "You guys got outta Hawkins Lab, didn't you? That weird Scientist Clubhouse with the creepy gate?"

"Hawkins Lab..." Mike repeated, seeming to recognize the name.

"And your friends?" El asked. "Do they have powers, too? What were they again, Eight and Ten?"

"Ten and Twelve." Nine said sharply.

"Yeah, what do they do?" asked Nancy.

The boys looked at each other, apparently trying to decide again if they could trust the others. Finally, Mike said, "They see things."

"Things?" Nancy asked.

"Ten sees new things." Mike explained. "Things that happen soon."

"The Future?" El's eyes widened.

Mike shrugged. "Twelve sees people. Their light. He sees... hidden things, too."

"Like what?" Nancy raised her eyebrow.

Mike shook his head.

"Seriously, kid, you've gotta tell us this stuff-" Nancy began.

El shushed her. "Nancy, you're gonna scare him."

"We *need* to know this stuff, El!" Nancy glared at her. "If there are guys threatening to kill us for talking to these kids, we need to know *why*. Did you two kill someone or something?"

“Nancy!” El yelled.

Nancy leaned forwards. “So you know where Max is, but not Barb? Where’s Max?”

“Hiding.” Mike said.

“From what?”

Mike’s eyes went wide, and Nancy grabbed his shoulders. “What is she hiding from?”

“No!” Nine yelled, reaching forwards and pushing Nancy off of his friend, before standing in front of him, hands out in a defensive position.

Nancy jumped to her feet, yelling, “What is *wrong* with you two? What are you hiding?”

“Nancy, leave them alone!” El jumped to her feet.

“*What are you hiding?*”

Mike put his hands over his ears and *screamed*. Suddenly, boxes toppled over, spilling onto the ground, their contents spilling onto the floor. The others jumped, trying to avoid the items hitting their feet and crashing around. Nine whipped around immediately, wrapping Mike in a protective hug and giving a death glare to Nancy, who was breathing deeply and looking shocked. El shivered for a second, then walked towards the boys, putting an arm around Mike as well. Nine stiffened as she did, but he didn’t do anything to stop her.

They stood there for several seconds, until El heard a buzz.

“Chief? Chief, you better take a look at this. You gotta get to the Quarry.”

El’s heart skipped a beat, and she slowly let go of Mike, running towards her bag and pulling the Walkie-Talkie out. She’d left the channel open, and one of the Officers had called.

She heard her Dad respond. “I’m in the middle of something, Powell.”

“Hopper, they found a body.”

The world seemed to freeze around her; she felt *cold*, and *lost*, and she couldn't *breathe*. Everything was dark, and her heart sank into her stomach, and she felt *terrified*.

“I'll be right there.” She barely registered her Dad saying, barely heard Nancy gasp behind her, didn't notice *anything* until she heard a voice from beside her.

“El?”

El jumped to her feet, whipping around and staring Mike in the face. “Is it Max?”

Mike still looked shaken, but El barely noticed. She couldn't feel *anything*. He didn't respond, so she asked again. “*Is it Max?*”

When he still said nothing, El opened the trapdoor and rushed out, clipping the Walkie-Talkie to her belt. She *ran*, not caring who was behind her, not caring if the boys stayed or went, not caring what Nancy would do with them. She threw herself down the stairs, rushed out the door, and jumped on her bike. She knew the way to the Quarry, she knew her way through the woods, she knew her way to where the Body was.

“El!” she could hear Nancy call from far, far away. Or maybe close up. El didn't know, she didn't care; she simply pedaled, moving farther and farther until her house was gone.

Nancy caught up with her at the Quarry.

El's bike was fast, but riding through dirt and sticks slowed her down enough for Nancy to eventually run up behind her. Or maybe she just stopped and stared for long enough that Nancy could have just walked her whole way there. She didn't know; time didn't matter. Nothing mattered.

Because the ambulance had arrived, and the paramedics had dragged a corpse from the lake.

There was no mistaking that long, red hair.

“El...” Nancy might have said. The teenager might have touched her shoulder, or maybe she hugged her, or maybe she yelled. El couldn’t tell. She got off her bike and walked forwards, her feet taking her ahead, her mind blank.

She thought they were going to find her. She thought they were going to *save* her. She thought she’d be *safe*.

She saw her Dad drive up. Some woman was with him. She knew her name, but she couldn’t think of it. She just saw her Dad get out of the car and get closer to the body, his face falling. She started running, then, yelling, *screaming*. She couldn’t think, she could barely see, she was *crying*, and *sobbing*, and couldn’t *stop*.

Her Dad was there, then. He hugged her, told her to calm down, tried to make her calm down, but she *couldn’t*. She screamed, pounded her fists into his chest, and *wailed*. She screamed until she ran out of energy, then she just cried, her Dad’s arms wrapped around her, voices everywhere, a siren sounding.

She didn’t care.

Max was *gone*.

*Max was gone.*

She sat in the shed, but not *the* shed. It was in the forest, but not *her* forest. Everything was bluer, darker, colder.

*Max was gone.*

The Monster never came back after she shot it. Maybe it thought she’d left.

*Max was gone.*

Humming. That was all she could do. She tried to flicker the lights, tried to call her friends, even snuck off to her house to try and talk to

her family. They never paid attention. They never thought it might be her. She thought they might have less hope than she did.

*Max was gone.*

So she kept humming.

*Max was gone.*

She was singing now. She didn't care if the Thing heard. At least someone would hear her for once.

*"S-sweet dreams are m-m-made of this... W-who am I to dis-disagree?"*

*Max was gone.*

*"T-t-travel th-the world and the s-s-seven s-seas... Ev-everybody..."*

*Max was crying. She was gone.*

*Gone...*



## 14. Not Dead Yet

### CHAPTER FOURTEEN

#### *Not Dead Yet*

El got to stay home from school again.

She didn't care.

Her Dad didn't need to tell her to stay home. He simply knocked on her door in the morning and gently told her that he was driving Ms. Hargrove to the morgue to identify the body, and then he'd be out all day. El simply nodded, and it took her another hour to even get out of bed. She didn't shower, she just threw on a dress that she picked up from her floor and went downstairs to get food. She realized once she was down that she didn't feel hungry, so she just stared at the wall for a bit until she decided she should probably feed the two kids still living in her attic. At least, she *thought* they were still there. She hadn't checked since her Dad had driven her back from the Quarry. She had left her Bike behind, but she could see it out the porch window now. Nancy might have brought it back. She didn't know. She didn't *care*.

She tried to dig Eggos out of the pantry, but she only saw empty boxes, empty boxes, empty boxes. Everything was *empty*.

She didn't know if there was any other food that the boys would like; honestly, she wasn't sure how much food there *was*; her and Hopper only really went grocery shopping when there was literally nothing edible in the house. She supposed it was about time, then. She didn't really want to go outside, to hear everyone's whispers and see everyone's stares and definitely didn't want to interact with any humans for quite a long time, but the boys were going to need food.

So she biked to town, keeping her head down and hoping nobody tried to talk to her. Nobody did. She could tell they were watching her, though, even more than usual. She *hated* that. She didn't want to

think about things. About *anything*. She just needed to get some food and go back home.

The grocery store was mostly empty, with everybody at school or work. She was happy for that. The empty aisles were long and blank and *boring*, and it was the place Max had hated the most; every time her Mother forced her to go, Max would try and get kicked out, riding her skateboard in the hall, starting a shopping-cart race with the boys from the next town over, climbing the shelves and sleeping on the top until they dragged her down...

Maybe coming here wasn't such a good idea after all.

El kept going, though, grabbing two boxes of Eggos and shoving them under her arm. She didn't think they were missing anything else, they probably had milk and water and stuff at home. The boys didn't each much and she didn't feel like eating at all, so this would probably be good.

She turned the aisle, and stopped in her tracks. In front of her, piling boxes of food into a cart, was the person she least expected to see.

"Billy?"

Her voice was quiet; she hadn't used it since her screaming fit last night, but Max's stepbrother heard. He turned, an uncharacteristically panicked look in his eyes, until he saw who it was. His eyes narrowed, and he simply said, "Hey, dipshit," before turning back to his food.

"Wh-what are you doing here?" El asked.

"Getting food, dumbass. What do you think?"

El didn't think that any of Max's family would be focusing on groceries right now. "I..." she wasn't sure what to say. She wasn't *sorry* for his loss, he never gave a shit about his Stepsister.

She was surprised, though, when he said, "Look, I know you liked my sister, for whatever reason, so it sucks that you're alone now."

"Shouldn't you be with your parents?" El asked.

“Hell no.” Billy said. “I’m getting the *hell* outta town.”

*What?*

“My Dad was super pissed I let Max out on her own.” Billy explained. “I heard she wasn’t coming back, and I’m getting out before he can find me, or he’s gonna have two dead kids to bury.”

El still wasn’t sure what to say, choosing instead to stare at the ground.

“It’s all bullshit, I know. But I’m pretty sure our family’s cursed or something. First Max, then the lights keep going nuts at our place, and-”

“What did you say?”

Billy gave her a look. “I said the lights are going nuts at our place. Keep flickering on and off and shit. The Electric Company is calling bullshit on us, but it’s real. Not that it’ll bother me, anyway.”

He started to pass by her, his cart filled with as much food as he could probably buy with whatever money he had. El gave him a long stare; she felt sorry for him, that he literally thought his Dad would kill him, and from what Max had told her, he was probably right in that assumption. Still, he had been more than an asshole to both her and Max; Max had sometimes run to her house crying because of something he did to her.

What interested her now, though, was his house’s lights.

“So, I don’t understand, you went back to my house?”

School had just started, and Nancy and Steve were talking in the alley. The bell rung for everyone, but neither of them were paying attention.

“To look for Barb.” Nancy explained, staring at the ground.

“Yeah, okay, but why didn’t you just talk to me?” Steve seemed

confused by all of this, and Nancy wasn't sure what to say. She hadn't really wanted to talk today, due to what had happened the night before. But she *had* to talk to him now.

"I don't know, I-I was scared." She still was. If someone like Max could... if Max couldn't make it on her own, how long would Barb last?

"You seriously think you saw a guy in a mask hanging out in my yard?"

"I don't think it was a mask."

Steve gave her a look. "But he had no face?"

Nancy shook her head. "I don't know! I don't know, i just have a terrible feeling about this..."

Steve stared ahead, a blank look in his eyes, and he leaned against the wall. "Oh, this is bad. This is really bad."

"What?"

"The cops. They're gonna want to talk to all of us now. Tommy, Carol-"

"So?"

"My parents-" Steve looked like he was about to say something, but paused. He froze up, staring at the air again, and he said, "Oh, they're going to want to search the house."

"That doesn't matter!" Nancy said. "Barb is missing!"

"Listen, Nance, I... I'm sorry, I gotta go." Steve said, backing up.

"Steve? Steve, stop!" Nancy rushed up before he could go, putting a hand on his shoulder. "Steve, listen, this isn't about us! I don't care how much alcohol you've got hidden in your room, Barb could be in trouble!"

"I..." Steve stared at her, as if searching for something to say.

Nancy shook her head when she realized he wasn't going to respond, pushing past him and walking away. "I can't believe you right now. I can't believe you."

"Nancy!" he called after her, but she kept walking.

She walked past the school entrance, too. She walked right down the street, heading for the woods.

If nobody was going to help her find Barb, she was going to do it alone.

Hopper was in his office when Joyce showed up again.

She just walked in and sat down; Hopper wondered if his secretary was even bothering to talk to him anymore. She looked at him, he looked at the paperwork in front of him, and they were quiet for a while. Then, Hopper said, "So, what, you think *they* killed her?"

"No." Joyce finally said. "That's not her body."

Hopper sighed. "Joyce, listen, I know that apparently this Lab did some shit to you in the past, but it's over. I brought her parents to the morgue, they identified the body. She's *dead*."

"It's not a *real body*." Joyce said, her stubbornness showing.

"So, what, they faked the autopsy, too?" Hopper asked, remembering the paperwork being thrust into his hands, showing that the girl had hit her head and drowned. "Paid off Gary to pretend a kid he didn't know had died?"

"Gary didn't do the autopsy."

"What're you talking about, of course he did."

Joyce shook her head. "Guess who wandered into my store this morning? He said a bunch of state troopers came in and gave him the day off, they did the autopsy themselves. Isn't it a bit strange that people from the state would come in for some small-town girl unless

they were covering something up?”

“Joyce...” Hopper didn’t want to think about that body for any longer than he had to. He didn’t want to think of how it felt to see the child he’d seen every day for years dragged out of the water, not moving, the rest of her life stolen from her, and the sound of his daughter’s scream as she rushed in and saw her best friend being carried off. “Joyce, just let it go.”

“It’s not *her body*.” Joyce repeated, as if she could convince him just by saying it again. “It’s not! They’ve done this before, Hopper, they’ll do it again if-”

“Before?” Hopper looked up at her, and she stopped, suddenly realizing she’d let something slip. “Joyce, what do you mean ‘they’ve done this before?’”

Joyce paused, staring at him, before standing up. “I’m going to the Morgue.”

“Joyce, wait-” Hopper said, but the woman turned and left, leaving the door swinging behind her. He sighed, clipped a walkie-talkie to his belt, and followed. He didn’t know *what* she thought she was doing, but he had a feeling that it wasn’t going to end well.

“*Nine!*”

El threw the trapdoor open, climbing into the attic. “Nine, we need to talk, *now!*”

Nine climbed out of the blanket fort, looking more confused than angry, and that was good enough for her.

“Have you been to the Hargrove house?”

“Hargrove?” Nine repeated.

“Max’s house. Not the shed, the house her family lives at.”

Nine shook his head. “El...”

El grabbed him by the shoulders. “Listen, Nine. Billy said his house’s lights kept flickering off and on, and the Electric Company doesn’t think it’s them. If you didn’t do it, *who did?*”

Nine paused, before saying quietly, “The Other Side...”

“The what?” El asked.

Nine stood up, running to an open box; El realized as he did that the attic had been cleaned up- the mess from the night before was gone. However, her thought process didn’t last long, as Nine pulled out one of her DnD boards, slamming it onto the ground in front of her and leaning down; when El kneeled next to him, he flipped the board. “Other Side.” he said.

“Other Side?” El asked.

“Max, on the Other Side.” Nine explained. “Upside-Down.”

“She was there?” El asked, her heart sinking again when she had to use the past tense. “What was she doing there?”

“Hiding.”

She was getting real tired of that word. “From *what?*”

Nine paused, before reaching into her DnD box again, and pulling out a monster figure, slamming it onto the board. El inspected the figure; it was the Demogorgon, a figure she hadn’t yet been able to use; she hadn’t even seen the thing since they’d moved back to Hawkins. But she did know what the Demogorgon did, and it was a pretty tough monster to beat, that was for sure.

After a second, she realized something, and carefully asked, “Where’s Mike?”

It took Nine a minute to figure out who she was talking about, and then his face dropped from serious to sad. He gestured at the Blanket Fort, and El rushed forwards, pushing aside the opening flap. “Mike, I-”

She stopped, her eyes going wide and her stomach dropping. Mike

was curled up in the corner, head in his knees, shaking a little. El slowly crept forwards, until she was right next to him. "M-Mike?"

Mike kept his head down, but he said quietly, "I'm s-sorry..."

"It's not your fault." El said, almost instinctively putting her arms around the boy and hugging him to her. "It's not your fault, I should've been looking for her more... I should've..." her voice cracked, and she stopped talking.

Mike didn't respond for a long while, but he eventually said, "You hate me?"

"What? No! No, I don't hate you!" El said. "I don't hate you, I just... I *miss* Max."

She was about to start crying again, about to burst into tears, when Mike said, "Still hiding."

"What?"

"Max. She's still hiding."

El sighed, slowly pulling out of the hug. Mike was looking at her now, his eyes still sad, a little damp, but *determined*.

"She's not still hiding, Mike. She's gone."

Mike shook his head. "Still hiding."

"Mike, she's *gone*."

The boy crossed his arms. "Talker."

"What?"

He held out his hand, as if asking for something. When she still stared at him in confusion, he started miming talking into a box. "Talker."

"The Walkie-Talkie?"

Mike nodded, holding out his hand.



“Uh, hold on a sec.” El said, before leaving the fort and rushing to the trapdoor.

She had to run to her room and find the Walkie-Talkie in her mess of a floor. She brought it back up, passing by Nine on the way to the fort; the boy was sitting in front of a lamp, making it turn on and off. She went back into the fort, handing the Walkie-Talkie to Mike. “I don’t see what this’ll do, but I don’t think I want it anymore, so you can have it.”

Mike started fiddling with the receiver, flipping through channels and staring down at it. After a second, El left the tent, sighing. She didn’t know what Mike thought he was doing, but she didn’t want to look at the communication device for a while.

She sat by Nine, before saying, “I, uh, I thought of a name for you.”

Nine cocked his head, staring at her blankly.

“Lucas.” El eventually said. “It means ‘light’, and I figured that, you know, kinda fit.” She let out a quiet laugh, before letting her face fall again. “I mean, if you don’t care, it doesn’t matter...”

“Lucas.” Nine repeated, sounding out the name. After a second, he said, “Better than Nine.”

At that moment, Mike burst out of the blanket fort, a very serious look on his face as he sat in front of the other two. He held out the walkie-talkie, holding it between them all. At first, it just buzzed, and El gave Mike a dark look. “Listen, Mike, it’s not-”

*“I’ve b-been, afraid of changing, cause I... cause I built my life around you...”*

El’s entire body froze over. She recognized that song. More importantly, she recognized that *voice*. Mike and Nine- Mike and *Lucas*- both looked at her, as she struggled to remember how to breathe.

*“But t-t-t-time make you b-bolder, a-and children get older...”*

El slowly reached forwards, taking the Walkie-Talkie from Mike, and

staring down at it. Yes, that voice was *real*. It was *real* and it was *Max*.

*"I'm getting older, too..."*

El pressed the button, her voice raising into a yell. "Max? Max! Max, it's me, it's El, do you copy? Max?"

No response. The walkie-talkie continued to buzz, no response.

"W-was that?"

"Max." Mike nodded. "Still hiding."

El paused, looking between the two boys, and then she said, "We need a stronger radio... we need something to talk to Max with... and I know where to find it."

She turned to the others, before saying, "Boys, how do you feel about your first day of school?"

## 15. Dress Up

### CHAPTER FIFTEEN

#### *Dress Up*

Jonathan was in the woods, walking through the trees.

Honestly, the last few days had been quite weird for him, but it wasn't as if he had a normal life either. He figured most teenagers would drag that terrified kid to the Police Station the second they found him, or try harder to get the kid to talk and say where his parents were or why he was so focused on finding his friends, but for some reason, this poor boy only named 012 had decided to trust him, seemed to think that he would protect him. It would take more than a few unanswered questions to betray the blind trust he'd somehow been given.

So now, Jonathan was trekking through the forest, looking for kids with number names with only one drawing for reference, and apparently watching out for some kind of Monster that 012 refused to speak about- that really shouldn't surprise him, he wasn't entirely sure the boy *could* talk, but it was still quite a gruesome image. Jonathan figured he probably should have told his Mom he was going somewhere, but he'd explain it to her later. She was probably still at work, anyway.

He was lost in his thoughts until he heard the footsteps.

Jonathan's first thought was that it might be one of the kids, but that idea died pretty quick; the footsteps were too heavy for that. However, whoever was in the woods with him was *running*. They seemed to be in quite a hurry.

Just as he was about to say something, a figure burst through the trees, running straight into him. The two of them toppled to the ground, and Jonathan landed *hard* on his back. He sat up as fast as he could, prepared to run if this thing turned out to be dangerous;

however, when he saw what it was, he could only freeze in place.

Nancy Wheeler scrambled to her feet, just as surprised as he was. "Oh, uh... hi." she said.

Jonathan just stared for a second, trying to figure out why she was in the woods, and why she was talking to him. "Uh..." was his very intelligent reply.

After a second, Nancy said, "Sorry about... that."

Jonathan nodded.

Nancy looked around, before asking, "What are you doing in the woods?"

"Just... looking for my... dog." Jonathan said, finally standing up.

"Oh, is he missing?"

"No, he just likes to run in the woods." Jonathan shrugged. "W-what are you-?"

"Oh, I'm..." Nancy glanced around, almost as if looking for an escape, before she said, "I'm looking for my friend Barb. Have you seen her?"

Jonathan shook his head. "Is, uh, is she the one with red hair and the glasses?"

"Yeah." Nancy nodded.

They looked at each other again, before Nancy said, "It's just... you, you heard about Max, right? I thought that if she was in the woods, maybe Barb might have..." She sighed. "It's stupid."

"No, it's not." Jonathan said.

Nancy sighed. "I should... I should really check on El, I just..." she nodded at him. She seemed to be thinking over something, before saying, "Is that yours?"

Jonathan turned to follow her gaze, and froze. 012's drawing had fallen onto the ground, face down. Before he could say anything, Nancy reached down and grabbed it, flipping it over. "N-no, don't."

Nancy gave him a look. "Sorry, it looks ripped. You didn't need the full receipt, did y-"

She paused, looking at the bottom of the paper. Jonathan wondered what exactly had caught her attention, saying carefully, "Look, it's not mine, it-"

"What's this?" Nancy showed him the paper; Jonathan saw that the part that remained was the bottom half of 010's face, and the entirety of the Monster. She was pointing at the latter, looking grim.

Jonathan paused. "It's, uh, something that... that I thought I saw in the forest."

Nancy slowly looked between him and paper before saying, very carefully, "I think I saw it, too."

They both looked at each other, before Nancy said, "I need to get to... school... can I talk to you after that?"

Jonathan stuttered, "Oh, uh, I... yeah?"

"Can I keep this for a sec?"

He nodded.

"Thank you." She turned and left, and Jonathan stared after her.

It was a few more minutes before Jonathan remembered that he, too, had school to get to.

It took him even longer to realize she never gave him back the paper.

"Just hold *still*, Mike."

Mike flinched away from El's makeup brush, looking terrified.

“Ni- Lucas, can you please calm him down?”

Lucas still looked as wary as he always did, shaking his head.

El sighed. “Listen, I know everyone says boys don’t like makeup, but this is ridiculous. I just want you to look a little less like you’ve never seen the sun.”

Suddenly, a knock sounded at the door, and they all jumped. El dropped the brush, and said, “I’ll check the door. You guys stay here, *don’t* move.”

She jumped up, running to the front door and asking, “Who’s there?”

“El?”

El sighed and opened the door, looking up at Nancy. She suddenly remembered everything that had happened last night- even though she now knew that Max was alive, just thinking about that *body* ... well, now she must have looked convincingly sad, at least.

“Hi, I just... wanted to see how you were doing.” Nancy said.

“Yeah,” El said, trying to sound depressed. “I’m just... yeah. Look, sorry for bugging you last night, I-”

“Don’t worry, I get it.” Nancy said. She then said, “Can I see the boys for a second?”

“What boys?”

Nancy gave her a look. “The boys? The ones you keep in your attic?”

“Ooooh, them.” El said. “They’re, uh, sleeping.”

The teenager narrowed her eyes. “What are you hiding?”

“Nothing.”

Nancy pushed past her, walking into the house and turning the corner. “W-wait, Nancy!”

El caught up with her tutor as the older girl stopped, looking at the

two boys in bewilderment.

They were both wearing different clothing, much fancier and colored darker than what they'd been wearing when Nancy saw them last. Mike was wearing a baseball cap, a short, blonde wig peaking out from under it, while Lucas had a bandana tied around his head. Both boys had El's makeup brushes in hand, and were sitting on the kitchen counter, holding them above the sink, apparently about to dump them in the drain. They looked at both the girls as if they were deer caught in the headlights, and slowly, Mike threw his brushes at Lucas and jumped onto the floor, trying to look innocent.

"El..." Nancy stared. "What's going on?"

"Uh..." El replied. "D-dress up?" When Nancy gave her a sharp glare, El sighed. "Okay, so, uh, surprise! Max is alive, the body is fake, she's actually in an alternate dimension parallel to our own, and we're going to sneak into the school to use Mr. Clarke's radio to try and contact her."

Nancy blinked. "El, listen, if joking around is how you cope-"

"I'm not *trying* to cope!" El groaned. "Mike used the walkie-talkie and we could hear her! She was singing our song!"

"Our song?" Nancy asked.

"You know..." El said. "*Landslide*? It's like a million years old, Nance, you've gotta know it."

"How old do you think I am?"

El sighed. "Listen, Nance, Max is *alive*. She's hiding from some kind of monster, and-

"Monster?"

Nancy looked between the children, then pulled a slip of paper from her pocket. She showed it to them, and El backed up. It was a crude drawing of some kind of *creature*, its face flower-shaped and studded with teeth. It was simply labelled, "*MONSTER*."

“What the hell-” El began.

She heard a thud, and whipped around. Mike had dropped, crashing to the floor and covering his ears. El rushed forwards, grabbing him and sitting him up. “Mike? Mike!”

He had his eyes shut, breathing heavily. Lucas pushed past her, looking down at him. “Mike? Eleven? Mike?” he repeated, looking worried.

“What’s wrong with him?” El’s voice cracked slightly.

Lucas glared at her, then at Nancy. “Monster.” he said.

“What about it?” Nancy asked.

Lucas tried to find the words, looking between the two girls. He finally said, “From the Upside-Down.”

“Is that what Max is hiding from?”

Lucas nodded. “Mike saw it. He saw it once. It... it almost hurt us.”

El’s eyes widened, and she reached forwards, hugging Mike to her; the boy was still shaking. “It’s okay, it’s okay...” she said quietly, as she heard Nancy start to ask Lucas some questions about the Monster and Upside-Down. She didn’t care, she just hugged the poor boy closer to her. “It’s okay, it’s okay, it’s okay...”

After a second, she heard a quiet, muffled voice. “S-sorry...”

“It’s okay.” She said again. “The Monster won’t hurt you. I won’t let it.”

She didn’t know how. She didn’t know how a twelve-year-old girl could ever take on a monster, especially one that caused someone like Max to hide instead of fight. But she wouldn’t let it get to Mike. She didn’t want anything to hurt him ever again. She’d rather die than let that happen.



“Joyce!”

Whether she didn't hear him or didn't care, Joyce didn't turn around. She'd driven over to the Morgue, and Hopper had only barely beaten her there. She'd pushed past him and walked straight to the door, opening it and walking in without looking to see if Hopper was following her; which, of course, he was.

He walked in just as he saw Joyce enter another hall; the Secretary said something to the effect of, “What the hell is she doing?”, but Hopper just gave her an apologetic look and followed Joyce in.

He wasn't sure if Joyce knew where she was going, but she did manage to make it to a hall, which now had a door blocked off by a State Trooper.

“Hey, you can't be back here!” he said, dropping his book and looking at Joyce, who stopped in front of him.

“Huh, that's an interesting point.” Joyce said, then punched him across the face. His head slammed into the door, and he crumpled to the ground. Joyce paused, looking down on him as Hopper ran up, staring at her in shock. “That was easier than I thought it'd be.”

“Joyce, what the *hell* are you doing?” Hopper asked.

“I'm *showing you* that the body is fake.”

“Joyce, just leave it alone. Leave it alone, she's *dead*.”

“She's *not dead*! They either have her or they know where she is. It's what they did with Will!”

She stopped there, her eyes angry again. Hopper stared at her. “Joyce, who's Will?”

She took a deep breath, and bent down, grabbing a key from off the guard's belt. “Trust me.” she said. “Just... trust me, Hopper.”

She held out the key, using her eyes to ask him to take it. Hopper looked to the guard, to the key, to her. Finally, he reached forwards and took the key, turning to the door and unlocking it.

It was another cold hallway after that, and then Hopper pushed open the doors to the dark room behind. The Fridge was in there, the one they stored it in. He hesitated, staring ahead, but Joyce had no such problems walking up and opening the doors, looking for the body. She finally found it, pulling out a shelf to reveal the cold, pale body of Max Mayfield.

Hopper felt *sick* looking at it, seeing the white flesh and her blank stare. Joyce, however, simply asked, "Have you got a knife?"

"*What?*"

"A knife, Hopper." Joyce sounded so *frustrated*, holding out her hand.

Hopper looked between her and the body, instantly knowing what she intended to do. "No, no."

"*Really?*" Joyce groaned. "Just give me a knife, Hopper, and if I'm wrong, then I'll go home. Okay?"

Hopper stared at her, considering. "Who's Will?"

Joyce stared at him, looking angrier by the second. "Is that *important?*"

"Joyce. Who's Will?"

Joyce sighed. "Get me a knife, and I'll... I'll tell you. Just let me prove this to you."

Hopper reached into his pocket, feeling his pocketknife. After a second, he handed it to her, and she reached down, cutting it into Max's arm. Hopper wanted to look away, but before he could, Joyce reached into the cut and pulled out a handful of cotton.

He stared in shock as she pulled out more, opening the rip more to show him that the entire body was *stuffed* with the cotton. Joyce looked back up at him, staring him dead in the eye.

"Will is my son." she said. "And those bastards at the Lab took him away from me."

## 16. Assembly

### Notes for the Chapter:

Posting a bit early today cause I'm going to see Wicked with some friends. Thanks again for the nice comments! And I know it's taking forever to get to Dustin, don't worry, I think you'll all be happy with his eventual entrance. :D :D :D

### CHAPTER SIXTEEN

#### *Assembly*

“Okay, just be *really* careful.”

The boys were looking around in wonder at the building around them; lockers lined the hallways, and there were muffled conversations in classrooms behind closed doors. Mike's eyes trailed across the occasional decorations on the doors and lockers, excited at the new pretty things. “Big place.” Lucas simply said, moving closer to Mike.

“Sure.” Nancy crossed her arms. “I'm gonna be honest, Middle School was a trainwreck for me.”

Nancy had just joined them outside, running up and apologizing for her lateness; apparently she'd been called in for questioning about Barb's disappearance with Powell and Callahan, and she was skipping classes in order to make it for the Mission. El was fine with that; it gave her extra time to get Mike to sit down long enough for makeup, and to sneak them all over to school without being seen.

“We just need to make it to the AV Club, and then we can talk to Max, and then we can leave.” El said, grabbing Mike's hand and dragging him behind her, leading the way down the hall.

As they walked, a voice sounded over the intercom, and El could feel Mike grip her hand tighter, surprised by the sudden noise. “Attention,

students,” said the announcer. “There will be an assembly to honor Maxine Mayfield in the gymnasium now...”

El shut her eyes and pressed on, leading the group to the AV Club door. She released Mike’s hand and grabbed the handle, turning and pushing. It didn’t open.

“It’s locked?” she said, puzzled. She thought that Mr. Clarke would’ve left it open.

“Are you shitting me?” Nancy said. She stepped forwards, pulling a hairpin out of her hair. “Move over, I’ll get it.”

However, the second she stepped up, Mr. Clarke turned the corner. “El?”

El jumped, whipping around and trying to look innocent. Nancy froze, her hand almost to the door handle. Lucas stepped forwards, prepared to jump into a defensive position should the situation arise. Mike, meanwhile, stepped closer to El.

Mr. Clarke didn’t seem to notice this incredibly suspicious behavior. “Assembly’s about to start.”

“Y-yeah.” El said. “I just, uh...”

“I’m helping her.” Nancy said, stepping forwards and throwing her arm around the younger girl. “Processing her grief and all that. I was helping her find a place... to cry.”

El resisted the urge to roll her eyes back into her head.

Mr. Clarke gave her a look, before turning to El. “Look, I get it. I know how hard this is for you. But let’s be there for Max.” He reached into his pocket, and tossed her a pair of keys. “And after that, the room’s yours for the day. How’s that?”

El smiled and nodded, and Mr. Clarke turned to the boys. “I don’t believe we’ve met. What are your names?”

The two girls froze, as the boys seemed to contemplate their response. Finally, Nancy said, “These are Lucas and Mike.”

“They’re my cousins!” El shouted impulsively.

“Second cousins.” Nancy added.

Mr. Clarke looked between them, and El realized that neither of them resembled her in the slightest, or her Father, or each other. “Your cousins?”

El smiled awkwardly, and then announced, “They’re twins!”

*Shit.*

“They’re here for the funeral.” Nancy took over. “They, uh, were pretty close with Max. Lucas had a crush on her.”

The boys turned to the others, bewilderment written on their faces, but Mr. Clarke was still oblivious to this. “Well, welcome to Hawkins Middle, boys. I wish you were here under better circumstances.”

Lucas didn’t respond, probably trying to work out what a “crush” was, but Mike very politely said, “Thank you.”

Mr. Clarke looked carefully at him. “Where are you from, exactly?”

Nancy and El looked in horror at each other, and after a second, Lucas said, “Bad place.”

“Sweden!” Nancy interrupted, smiling brightly.

“Dad has a lot of Swedish Family.” El nodded.

“They hate it there.” Nancy added. “It’s... cold.”

“Sub-zero.” El nodded.

After a second, Mike very helpfully added, “I like Eggos.”

Mr. Clarke stared at them in silence, until El said, “We should probably go.”

Nancy opened the assembly door a bit too loud.

El entered, and felt every eye in the room turn straight to her. She froze up, staring ahead, and heard Lucas behind her try to turn and leave, only for Nancy to stop him and drag him back.

“Lots of people.” Mike whispered to her, eyes wide.

El nodded, grabbing his hand. “Just stay with me.”

The children were shepherded to some empty seats, and El did her best to shield Mike and Lucas from curious eyes, as the Principal continued the speech they’d apparently interrupted. As they did, Nancy leaned over. “Listen, El, I have to go. I’ve gotta get back to... to school. Will you be alright without me?”

El nodded slowly, glancing around at the other kids, who were slowly turning back to the front. Nancy stood to go, and the kids watched her rush out from the corner of their eyes. As she left, El suddenly realized that she was still holding Mike’s hand. She carefully let go, turning back to the front. She thought she noticed Mike glance at her, something sad in his eyes, but that was probably just her imagination.

Right now she had to get through an assembly for her friend who wasn’t dead.

The boy curled up on the floor of the shack, shivering under Jonathan’s coat.

He’d been cold before, he’d been hungry before, he’d been *alone* before. None of this should bother him. But he *missed* them. The others had been there for him for a long while- he didn’t know how long, time was irrelevant to him. They couldn’t protect him from the Lab, true, but they could be *there*, cheer him up, hug him and let him sit in silence, let him just *exist* for a while. And he’d be there for them, cheering with the others whenever they did something new with their powers, throw his arms around them when they’d just been released from Papa’s favorite punishment or when they’d been pushed too far. Just being together made them happy, made them feel *good*. Which might be the reason they were never *allowed* to do

that.

The Others had been the first people he'd seen with a Good Aura, too. The Doctors had always had sharp, red colors that hurt his eyes, and even Papa shone a deep crimson whenever he gave the boy a chance to Look. But when the boy had been brought to Hawkins Lab for the first time, he remembered being walked down a hall and passing by a room with another boy inside. He'd never seen someone his own age, and he felt *drawn* to him somehow. While the Doctors weren't looking, he focused on the boy and Looked into his light, and was shocked to see a crystal blue around him, a stark contrast to all the Red he'd always seen. The other boys had similar shades of blue, though none quite the exact color as the others; the light flowed differently, too, with some spiking up as they moved, some flowing by seamlessly, some swirling around like a dance. Eventually, the boy had been able to see his own Aura, much paler than the others, moving slower and quieter, but he liked it. It was *nice*. And it was different from the others; the first time he'd seen a similar Aura was Jonathan, but even then, he'd snuck another Look while Jonathan was helping him set up the Shack, and he had slight differences; his shade of blue was ever-so-slightly darker, the flow of the light was a little sharper, and it spun around his fingers like a whirlwind, a contrast to the boy's Aura, which simply enveloped his hands and flowed up like a reverse waterfall.

He'd wondered what the differences in light meant for a long while; the Doctors had asked him that question for as long as he remembered, but he could never quite figure it out. Was the sharpness of the flow showing intelligence, or impatience, or resentment? Did the pattern of the flow show kindness, or age, or health? But after he'd been with the Others for a long time, he thought he'd figured out the colors. He thought that it showed morality; the more red, the darker the soul. At least, that was his assumption. Though all the Blue-Colored people he'd seen had been kind, he hadn't seen that many. And Papa's light was a dark red, and Papa wasn't bad... was he? The boy didn't want to think about that.

The boy figured he shouldn't keep thinking about that place. He was out, right? But now, even though he was free, even though the Bad Men couldn't get to him yet, even though he had Jonathan and his

freedom, he didn't have the Others. They were lost, alone, somewhere in the woods- that is, if they weren't dragged back to the Lab. He *hoped* they hadn't been dragged back to the Lab. And even if they hadn't, the Monster was probably still in the woods. And it was probably hunting them. It was probably hunting *him*.

He wondered if he should run. Maybe he should have left with Jonathan earlier. The teenager offered to take him back to his "house" every time he came, but that would put him in danger. He knew what the Bad Men would do to *him* if they caught him, and they needed him alive- at least, he hoped they needed him alive. But Jonathan? He was no use to them. He'd disappear, like the man who'd taught him the Tapping Code, like the man who told them to stop pushing 010 after the poor boy had a breakdown, like the woman who gave him an extra blanket on a cold night, like poor, angry 008. And he didn't want Jonathan to disappear. Jonathan gave him a coat, and food, and *crayons*. He'd only had crayons once in the Lab, so long ago he could barely remember, but he remembered how much he loved to draw and sketch. He'd gotten real good, until they'd taken him to the new Lab, with better equipment and harder tests and sterner glares and less food and less attention and less *love*, and he'd been forced to leave his crayons behind. The crayons had disappeared, just like everyone else. Why did the boy always have to be *alone*? Why couldn't he just leave with his friends, and never see the Lab again, or the Doctors again, or-

Or...

He was hard on him, but he was his *Papa*. Papa loved him. Papa loved him...

Right?



## 17. Getting There

### CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

#### *Getting There*

El slumped in her seat, hoping that she looked more depressed than bored by the scene in front of her. Mike looked over at her and slumped, too, as if wondering if that was what he was supposed to do. Lucas simply gave them glares and turned to the front, listening intently. El glanced around the crowd, of people looking sad or bored or blank. She turned to Mike and whispered. "Most of these people didn't even know Max."

Mike looked at her blankly. "I didn't."

"Yeah, but that's different, these kids all went to school here and couldn't give less of a damn about her."

She suddenly heard a pretty loud snort, and shot up in her seat, her head snapping to the left. A few rows above in the bleachers, Troy and James were laughing to themselves. Troy pulled some kind of face, mocking something that the Principal had said about Max. El narrowed her eyes into a glare, imitating the face Lucas always made at her whenever she suggested something. She didn't see Mike glare beside her as well, but she did hear him mutter angrily, "Mouthbreather."

El nodded.

Joyce looked up as Hopper got in the car. "What happened?" she asked, her voice expressionless.

"Just what we thought." Hopper sighed. "I found the guy who found the body, he's a lying bastard."

"Is he working for them?"

"Couldn't get him to say that, but it's a good assumption." Hopper said, starting the car. "We should probably get out of here, though."

Joyce nodded as the car started to drive, staring blankly out the window. She was pretty sure that they were heading to Hopper's house, now. He'd said something about checking on El before continuing, but that wasn't exactly a short drive. Maybe ten minutes. And she was pretty sure that it wasn't going to be a quiet ride.

Sure enough, about three minutes later, Hopper said, "So."

She knew what that meant, but she kept silent anyway.

He finally said more. "Does Jonathan know...?"

"No." Joyce shook her head. "Well, not everything, he was only four when it all happened. He knows Will... existed, and I don't think he... but he doesn't know about the Lab."

"You gonna..." Hopper said, glancing out the window so as to avoid her eyes. "You gonna tell me anything about it?"

Joyce sighed. She wondered if she could get away with not talking about it for any longer, but... no, he should know. If he was going to fight the Lab with her, he should *know*.

"Lonnie and I got divorced before I found out I was pregnant with Will." Joyce admitted, still staring out the window so as not to have to look at him. "It was pretty open and shut, neither of us wanted to work it out and Lonnie wanted nothing to do with Jonathan. We might have... I don't know if we might've tried harder if we knew we were having another kid. But once he was gone, I realized I was going to have to take care of Jonathan on my own with barely any money and an unstable job."

She expected Hopper to say something, or say more things, but he stayed silent. So she continued. "I was only alone for a few weeks when... when *Brenner* showed up." She stared pointedly out the window, trying to focus on the sights and not on *that* son of a bitch. "He told me he needed test subjects for some new medication for something or other, and if I just ran a few experiments with them, I'd

have enough money to last until I found a good job. I was an idiot, I should've just said no, but I was just so *scared* that I wouldn't be able to support my son, so I just ignored my basic instincts and agreed. Jonathan stayed at a friend's house for a few weeks, and..."

She took a deep breath, trying to keep the memories from surfacing too much. "And I also should've backed out after the first test. It was hell on Earth, Hop. But Brenner just kept telling me that I was helping out, to just take a few more tests, to just trust that I was doing something good. I stayed until I figured out I was pregnant with Will, and then nothing could make me stay. I didn't know what the *hell* they were doing to me, but there was no way on Earth it would be a good thing to expose an unborn kid to. I got paid for however much I did and I left with Jonathan. I didn't think that I would have to deal with that bullshit again, but when I went into labor, something went wrong, and..."

She shut her eyes harder, not to try and ignore her surroundings, but to keep herself from crying. She couldn't cry, not *now*. "Brenner was there. That's all I remembered when I woke up and the Doctors told me that Will didn't make it." She took a deep breath. "But I didn't believe them. They gave me a body, and it was fake. I tried to get Law Enforcement involved, I *knew* that they had him- that they *still* have him- but they made it pretty clear that any publicity wouldn't end well for me. And I don't care what happens to me, but Jonathan was only a kid and if I wasn't there, he'd either get sent to Lonnie or to a foster home and I couldn't do that to him.

"But I didn't give up. I started collecting things against the Lab, trying to figure out exactly *what* they were doing. I was stuck for a while, til I moved back here."

Hopper spoke again. "So, you moved back into town to get closer to the Lab?"

"Well, I can't say that was the only reason, but it was the most important." Joyce said.

They sat in silence for a while, until Joyce finally said, "You know, if they find out you know, you'll be in deep shit."

Hopper said, "I can deal with whatever they throw at me, Joyce."

"I'm sure you think so." Joyce said.

They drove the rest of the way in silence.

"Hey, shithead!"

El didn't care who heard her as she pushed through the crowd of kids, Mike and Lucas following her carefully. Troy and James turned around, those insufferable smirks on their faces.

"Well, look at what the cat dragged in." Troy said. "We were hoping you'd jumped in the lake with Little Red."

"I saw you laughing up there." El said, gesturing to the bleachers. "That's a pretty shitty thing to do."

"Didn't you listen to the Counselor, golden girl?" James smirked. "Grief shows itself in funny ways."

"Besides, what's there to be sad about?" Troy added. "Max's dancing on rainbows now, isn't she?"

El gave a quick glance around; students had started to gather around them, all looking much more interested in the fight than they had at any point during the assembly. Lucas moved a bit closer to Mike, putting a hand on his arm as more people surrounded them. Mike, however, had his eyes completely fixed on El.

She turned back around, and said, "You know, boys, I think we have a fight to finish, don't we?"

She rushed forwards before they could respond, pushing Troy to the ground, ducking around James, and sliding back to her original spot, her hands moving into fists.

Troy stood up as the students around them "ooohed", giving El a dark look. "You're dead, golden girl." he said, and he stepped forwards.

And then he stopped.

He looked puzzled, trying to pick up his feet, which seemed stuck to the ground. After a second, a dark stain appeared on his pants, causing El to step back in shock.

“He peed his pants!” some kid yelled, and the crowd started laughing.

In a dawning realization, El turned around. Lucas was staring, dumbfounded, at the same place. Mike looked up at El, a smile starting to brighten his face. He reached up, wiped the blood away from his nose, and turned to head to the door. El rushed after him, leaving the other children behind.

## 18. Talking to Max

### CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

#### *Talking to Max*

“Mike, that was *awesome!*”

El grinned at the boy as they raced down the hall; they’d started to run once they heard other students leave the assembly, and the boys were following El back to the AV Room. Mike looked blank at her as they ran, and El decided to elaborate. “Troy is *such* a little shit, that was the most cathartic thing in the world. Wait til Max gets back, she’ll love to hear about that!”

They turned the corner to the AV Room, and El stuck the key in the lock, turning it as she continued talking. “Hey, once we find your friends *and* Max, we could totally have enough kids for a DnD Party! I haven’t had a proper Party since before we moved here, and even then, they didn’t like me much...”

The door opened, and El shepherded the boys inside, closing the door and flipping on the lights. Up ahead was Mr. Clarke’s huge Ham Shack Radio, which had enough power to reach Austrailia- and, hopefully, another dimension. As she started to fiddle with the nobs, she gestured for Mike to sit down on the rolling chair in front of it; when he did, Lucas stood behind him, arms crossed and glaring at El.

“You can use this to talk to her, right, Mike?” El asked, as the radio started to turn on. “You can find her?”

Mike was silent, but reached his hands forwards and touched the radio.

“*Eleven, are you listening?*”

*He sat in the lab, an itchy thing on his head with tangled wires, and a*

large picture placed on the table before him. It was of a man that he'd only seen briefly in the halls, but Papa was pointing at him as if he was important. "I need you to find him."

"H-hurt him?" He asked.

"No, I don't want you to hurt him." Papa said. "I want you to listen to him."

"Listen?"

"Yes. I want you to listen to what he says, and repeat his words back to me. Just like we used to with those old nursery rhymes, do you remember? Think you can do that for me?"

He nodded.

"Good."

He sat up, staring at the photo, before shutting his eyes. He saw himself in a dark hallway, doors all around. The man was there, behind a door, repeating words. The boy simply focused on him, not noticing as the lights turned off, not noticing as the words started blasting over the loudspeakers.

Papa noticed.

"He's doing it!" El cheered, as the radio started to buzz.

In a second, the light went out. El jumped, worried that it would get too dark, but after a moment, the room brightened up again. El turned, to see Lucas wiping blood from his nose. She smiled at him. "Thanks, Lucas."

It took Lucas a second to realize she was talking to him, but he nodded at her, still not smiling, but not exactly glaring daggers at her, either.

Something sounded on the radio, which made El jump. She listened closely. It didn't sound like Max, it didn't sound like words. It

sounded like... footsteps.

“El!” Hopper said, shutting the door behind him and Joyce. “I’m back!”

No response. “I’ll go check on her.” he told her. “You should probably stay down here.”

Joyce nodded. “School should be over soon, I’ll see if I can reach Jonathan. Do you have a phone?”

“In the hall.” Hopper gestured, and Joyce turned to go as he went up the stairs. She walked to where he pointed, scanning for any signs of the phone, noticing that his house was a bit messier than hers; she almost stepped on an Eggo box left in the hallway. She looked ahead, and then stopped.

The phone was lying on the ground, the cord snapped, and the receiver on the ground. “Hopper...?” she called, and she heard him rush down the stairs.

He turned the corner, saying, “She’s not in her room.”

Joyce simply gestured at the phone, and Hopper stared. “What the-”

They both stopped, as they heard something... something that seemed to be coming from the wall. It sounded like large, heavy footsteps.

“What the hell...” Hopper finished, and they both turned to stare.

Joyce walked closer to the wall, Hopper trailing behind slightly. Suddenly, something was heard over the thumping; a small, scared voice, humming along to a Eurythmics song.

“Max?” Hopper called.

*“Hopper?”*



El jumped as the voice finally emerged from the speaker. "That's my Dad." she said, both explaining to the boys and clarifying to herself. "Why is she..."

Lucas shushed her, looking down at Mike with concern; his nose was starting to bleed.

"Max!" El shouted. "Max, can you hear us? Why can't she hear us?"

"Max?" Both Hopper and Joyce were yelling now, banging on the wall. A quick glance out the window told them that nobody was outside, so was she *inside* the wall?

Hopper wasted no time, reaching up and tearing at the wallpaper; it had been there since the house was built decades ago, and came off quite quickly. On the other side, however, wasn't wood, but some thick, slimy substance. On the other side of *that* was a vaguely familiar shape, with instantly recognizable red hair.

"Max!" Hopper yelled, reaching forwards and touching the substance, trying to push through it; it held firm. Joyce gasped and retreated a few steps, looking shocked, before moving forwards again to try and help.

"Hopper, you're here!" Max sounded so *relieved*, but so out of breath, so tired.

Something sounded behind her; it sounded reptilian, like a screech. Max whipped around, panic rising in her eyes and her voice. "Hopper, you have to go, now! Run! It's coming!"

"Max, are you okay?" Joyce asked.

"Max, where *are* you?" Hopper asked.

"I don't *know*, It's so cold, but it's so dark... it's *empty*!" Max yelled, her voice cracking. Was she *crying* ? "It's *evil*, you've got to go! Before the *thing* gets here! I've shot it once, I don't think it'll fall for that again!"

“Max, listen, we’re going to get you out of there.” Hopper said. “But if something’s coming, you have to hide, now!”

“Hopper-” Max was clearly sobbing now.

“Run!” Hopper yelled. “Run!”

Still weeping, Max fled, her image fading from behind the substance. Suddenly, wall closed up over it, wood replacing the goo, and Joyce and Hopper had to move their hands back to keep from getting them stuck. Suddenly, whatever was on the other side was gone, and so was Max.

The radio exploded, fire erupting from the speakers. El leapt backwards, screaming. Lucas was also surprised, the room darkening as his shock hit. El jumped forwards, grabbing Mike’s shoulders and asking, “Mike? Mike, are you okay?”

Mike opened his eyes, staring blankly at her. “Are you hurt? Can you move?”

The fire spread, and El let go of Mike momentarily, grabbing a fire extinguisher from the wall and spraying all over the Ham Radio, hoping that no lasting damage was done. When the fire was significantly stifled, she ran back to Mike, who was now being hugged by Lucas; Mike wasn’t responding. El knelt in front of him, worry rising in her. “Mike, can you *move*?”

Mike stared some more, and El tapped Lucas on the shoulder, waiting for him to turn around. “We have to get him out of here. *Move*.”

She grabbed the chair and started pushing, pausing only to throw open the door. The Fire Alarms were going off outside, but she wasn’t focusing on that. Her and Lucas were pushing the chair, they had to get Mike out of there, they had to get somewhere safe.

And then, maybe then, they could try to find Max again.

## 19. The Lab

### Notes for the Chapter:

I hope y'all like this cause it ended up pretty long...

### CHAPTER NINETEEN

#### *The Lab*

“El, pick up. El!”

“Shit.” El swore, grabbing her Walkie-Talkie. “Shit, shit, shit!”

The three kids were in the woods; they had abandoned the rolling chair once they reached the grass, and El was now carrying Mike. It was a bit harder than she would like, honestly, but she managed, especially since Lucas was there to catch him if she dropped. She sat down, leaning Mike against a tree, and pulled her Walkie-Talkie out of her bag, watching as Lucas went to sit besides Mike, grabbing his hand and holding it tight.

“Hey, Dad, I’m in.” El said, trying to keep her voice as calm as possible.

“Where the *hell* are you?”

*Shit, he went back to the house.* El groaned before responding. “Um, I’m... we were out of Eggos, so... I went to the store, I’m on my way back.”

There was a pause, before Hopper responded, “Okay... okay, I’m just glad you’re okay.”

El suddenly remembered that he probably still believed that Max was dead, and that they’d found her body last night. He was probably worried she had... “I’m fine, really, just... so much has happened.”

“Yeah. Listen, uh, I’m going to be out for most of the day, do you

want someone to stay with you?"

"No, no! I'm alright." Ooh, she might have said that too quickly.

"If you need anything, I'm sure Nancy can stop by, or go get Flo. Uh, something happened to the phone, so..."

Shit. "Oh, uh, yeah, I saw that, I was... it wasn't me."

"Okay, well, just go to the Wheelers' if you need someone."

El squinted; she heard another voice behind him as he talked. "Dad, who's there with you?"

"No one. Come home soon."

El didn't respond, just shoving her walkie-talkie into her bag. She turned to the others, shrugging. "House should be safe now, if Dad's leaving. Let's get moving again. Mike?"

Mike was staring ahead again, lost in his thoughts. Lucas looked at El and said, "I can carry."

El looked between him and the other boy and nodded, and they both stood, Lucas picking up Mike this time. Mike didn't respond, still looking into the air.

*"PAPA!"*

*He didn't want to kill it. It was pretty, it was quiet, it was innocent. He didn't want to hurt it. So he ripped the wires from his head, shaking and trying not to cry. He thought that maybe Papa would understand. He didn't.*

*He was being dragged away, kicking and screaming. Papa was watching. Not moving.*

*He kept screaming, struggling, hoping they would stop. He didn't want to be alone again. Not like last time. He'd been alone for weeks, waking up with his only food for the day in front of him, seeing nobody for the*

*longest time. He couldn't do that again. He couldn't do that again.*

*He looked back again at Papa, and saw something behind him. Another boy was being escorted, probably to the other room. He kept screaming, and the other boy looked up. He recognized 012's terrified eyes, his panic somehow increasing when he saw his friend being dragged away. In a flash, 012 tried to move, tried to break away from the Doctors with him, pushing forwards. He didn't last long; one of the men grabbed his arm and dragged him back, yelling at him, too. 012 started to cry, reaching forwards, trying to make it to him. Papa continued to watch the men drag him away; he didn't even turn to look at 012.*

*No. Solitary was bad enough. But now 012 was in trouble. He couldn't let 012 get in trouble. He couldn't.*

*The Men dropped him in the room, the dark room, the Lonely Room. They were about to shut the door, to leave him in there to rot until he'd agree to hurt the pretty animal, but he couldn't hurt something like that.*

*He could hurt them.*

*Before he could even think about what he was doing, he cocked his head, and one of the men's neck snapped to the left, and he dropped to the ground. In a flash, the other was gone, too.*

*Everything was suddenly silent. He breathed heavily, and slowly stepped forwards, his feet heavy, his heart sinking. He stood over the bodies, turning. Papa was coming closer, now. Interested. But he wasn't looking at Papa. He looked behind him, and saw the Doctors with 012. They looked scared.*

*So did 012.*

*The poor boy was breathing hard, his tears still streaming, but he looked at his friend in a way he'd never looked at him before. It was shock, sadness, surprise... fear.*

*He didn't want his friend to look at him like that. He didn't...*

*He crumpled to the ground, his legs giving out from under him.*

*Papa picked him up, carrying him away. He was slowly drifting off into*

*unconsciousness. He wouldn't have to think, wouldn't have to feel, wouldn't have to exist. Not until he woke up. Then he'd have to live again, he'd have to deal with the tests again, and the questions, and the loneliness.*

*Before the boy fell asleep, Papa passed 012, not even looking at him, nodding slightly at the men as they let him pass. He didn't notice the boy he was carrying look down at the other one, tears growing in his own eyes. He wanted to apologize. He couldn't.*

*That awful look 012 was giving him as he cried was the last thing he saw before he blacked out.*

“Are you sure about this?”

Hopper looked over at Joyce. They were driving again, this time to a more difficult destination.

“If those bastards did all the shit you think they did, then I'll do whatever the hell I can to take them down.” Hopper said. “Especially if it means finding out how to rescue Max. Whatever's happening to her, it... it can't be good.”

He trailed off, not knowing exactly how to phrase his thoughts. Max was *fearless*, she was brave and bold and sarcastic and bright. And if something was scaring her, it would have to be the most terrifying thing in the world. If the Lab knew where she was and decided it was better to just announce her dead than even *try* and save her...

“Hop?”

Hopper glanced over at her. “Yeah?”

“Thank you.”

He parked the car, and they looked ahead at the large, chain-link fence. Behind it was Hawkins Lab.

Hopper reached under his seat, pulling out his tools. “Ready to break through this fence?”

“More than ever.”

“And you’re sure that you don’t know who drew this?” Nancy asked.

Jonathan looked at the picture of the Monster, hoping against all hope that he was a good liar. Him and Nancy were standing outside the school building, watching people pass by. “Uh, yeah, yeah. I found it in the woods, thought I should bring it with me. It sounds stupid...”

“I saw it.”

Jonathan stared at her. “Wh-what?”

Nancy sighed. “My... my friend Barb went missing near the woods, I went to where I saw her last and I thought I saw this, but I wasn’t sure, I mean, it doesn’t look real, does it?”

Jonathan shook his head.

“Do... do you believe me?”

He nodded. He really hoped she didn’t ask *why*, because he figured *A lost kid I found in the woods drew this for me and refuses to talk about it but he’s clearly scared and I don’t know why but I don’t want him to be scared anymore* wasn’t an excuse most people would expect to hear.

Nancy sighed. “I think... tomorrow, are you free?”

“There’s school.”

“My parents are letting me off to go to Max’s funeral.” She said this too quickly, almost like she was hiding something... what would she be hiding? “If... after school, would you...” she sighed. “Listen, I want to go into the woods and try to find that thing. I’m certain it took Barb, and probably Max, too. If... if you want to come, I know that you didn’t know Barb or Max, so you don’t-”

“I’ll come.” Jonathan said, and she looked up in surprise. “If this thing is taking people, I want to make sure it... well, it doesn’t.”

Nancy seemed to accept this, a smile growing on her face. "After the funeral I'll be at my house. I don't have a car, can you meet me at the General Store after school?"

"Yeah." He wondered if she knew that his Mom worked there. Probably not. I mean, she didn't really know him that well. "See you then."

She turned to go, and Jonathan looked down at the paper she'd left, 012's drawing still showing. He probably wouldn't be able to get any information out of 012 about the monster- the poor boy never talked- but if he could destroy this thing, maybe he wouldn't be so scared. Maybe he'd let Jonathan help him.

They waited until night to finally enter the Lab.

That way they wouldn't have to pass as many guards, and they'd be harder to see outside. But they managed to sneak past the people at the door, managed to duck into rooms while people were passing, walked around trying to find *something*.

Joyce grabbed onto Hopper's arm at one point, and he could tell she was unnerved. He wondered if this was where she did all those experiments, or, if it was another lab, if it just reminded her, or even if it was just because this was where her son might be. In any case, he didn't make her let go.

They found a tarp, eventually, blocking off a hallway. It had a symbol on it, something that Hopper was pretty sure meant the other side held a dangerous substance. They both looked at each other, and moved forwards, walking through the tarp and into the hall.

Behind it was another hallway, a single door at the end. Joyce tried to knob, but it was locked. Hopper glanced to the side, seeing a card-scanner. Oh, shit.

He heard the sound of a gun loading behind him. "Put your hands up."

Oh, *shit*.



Another voice. "Hands *up*."

*Oh, SHIT.*

"Whoa, whoa, whoa!" Hopper said, turning around slowly. Joyce turned with him, her eyes focused ahead.

"Forgot all the cameras?" said the man with the gun, who turned to Joyce and suddenly paused. "*Byers?*"

Joyce smiled at him, but it wasn't her regular smile; there was a venom behind this. "Hello! I'm back!"

The two men, in their surprise, didn't notice that their guns were lowering. That was all Hopper needed; he rushed forwards, knocking one against the wall and grabbing his gun, pointing it at the other Guard. He pushed him against the wall as the other man fell, taking his gun as well, and noticed the Guard's ID Card hanging from his shirt collar. "Hey, can I borrow this?"

Still pointing his weapon, he walked forwards, scanning the card and unlocking the door. "Nice going, Hop." Joyce said, opening the door and rushing through. Hopper quickly followed, and the second the door closed, he shot the lock on the other side. "Keep going," he said, as Joyce paused for him. "They'll be coming after us in a second."

Hopper had a flashlight, and they had to use that, not able to find a lightswitch. They weren't entirely sure what they were looking for, only that there had to be something.

"Joyce, here." Hopper finally said, having shone his light into a certain room. He pointed to an upper corner, where a security camera rested. "This room's gotta be important, if..."

As Joyce joined him in the doorway, they both looked inside and realized what the room was. Ahead, in a corner, was a small bed, a stuffed animal kitten resting on top. On the wall hung a picture, two crude stick figures standing together. Squinting, Hopper thought he could make out the lettering beside each figure; one looked like a "Papa", and the other "010." Next to them, a red circle was drawn, something like lightning shooting out of it.

“Oh, God.” Joyce said quietly, and Hopper knew what she was thinking.

This room either belonged to Will, or some other small child. Either way, it wasn't a pleasant sight. Especially since the room had clearly been empty for a while.

They didn't stop there, though Joyce definitely lingered longer than Hopper, who continued down the hall, shining a light. If there was a kid there, he'd see the light, right? If a kid knew they were there, would they talk? He pressed on down the halls, as it got darker and darker and his flashlight only shone ahead.

He reached the end of a hall, to an opening; an elevator. “Alright, Joyce, let's try here.”

Joyce paused, glancing back down the hall. “Hopper... Hopper, if Will is *here*...”

Before she could finish, Hopper saw more flashlights started to shine down the hall. More Guards were coming.

The Elevator doors opened, and Hopper said, “Joyce, we've gotta go, they're coming.”

He walked into the elevator, expecting her to follow. However, she paused, still looking down the hall. “Joyce...” he said.

She turned to him and said, “Find Max.”

Before he could even argue, she was taking off down the hall, turning the corner in a flash. Hopper heard yelling- she probably ran into the guards- but he could hear her voice above the others- she was yelling, she was *angry*, she told them very clearly to piss off. He moved to get out of the elevator and follow, but the doors shut in his face.

When the door opened, it was to an even darker hall, even bigger than the last. The few lights dangling from the ceiling started flashing. Hopper looked back at the Elevator; he wanted to go back Joyce, he wanted to make sure she was alright, but if he went up, he'd be caught instantly. His only choice was to press on.

Only, the second he turned the corner, he froze up. “What the hell?”

Something was taking over the wall, something stringy and red. It looked like a sticky spider web, a bloody collection of streamers. It took him a second to recognize it, but once he did, there was no mistaking it. It was the same material that Max had been behind.

He reached forwards to touch it, but something moved in the corner of his eye. He turned around, seeing someone in a dark suit. “Hey!” he said, reaching down to grab the gun he’d pocketed, about to retaliate.

Someone grabbed him from behind, stuck a syringe in his neck, and everything went back.

## 20. The Funeral

### CHAPTER TWENTY

#### *The Funeral*

“Dad?”

Hopper woke up, having trouble opening his eyes at first. When his sight eventually came back, he saw his daughter leaning in front of him, looking confused.

“E-El?”

She gave him a look. “What happened? You didn’t come home at all last night, I ended up falling asleep in the attic. Are you...” she looked across the room, narrowing her eyes. “Are you *drunk*?”

Hopper sat up, taking in his surroundings. He wasn’t home... he was in the Police Precinct, lying across a chair in the waiting room. El was looking at a pile of empty beer bottles on the floor, which were reflecting light from the windows. Light? “What time is it?”

“Eight. You weren’t home when I got up so I came here to find you... goddamn, Dad, what happened last night?”

Instead of responding, Hopper got to his feet, his memories creeping back to him and panic settling in. He grabbed El’s arm, dragging her out the door, despite her confused shouts.

He ran behind the building, moving far enough away that nobody inside would be able to hear. He turned to El, who looked even more confused, and said, “What do you remember from last night?”

El pondered for a minute, still giving her Dad odd looks, before saying, “Uh, I got back from sch- the store, sorry, and hung out in my room. Around... around ten, I thought I heard someone at the door, but when I went down nobody was there? I was a little worried, though, so I went to the attic, and when I woke up you were still

gone... were you here?"

Hopper shook his head, looking to the door. "And I sure as hell wasn't drunk." Suddenly, something hit him. "El, did... have you seen Joyce Byers?"

If El could get even more confused at this point, it would be a miracle. "Uh, no? Why, are you two dating now or-"

"El, listen to me." Hopper said, still glancing at the building. "The Station might be bugged. Hell, maybe our house is, too."

Her eyes widened. "Bugged? You mean, like, microphones? Someone could... hear everything inside the house?"

"God, I don't know." Hopper said. "I... I can't explain what's going on right now, but it's not good. You... listen, if someone from Hawkins Lab comes near you, run the hell away."

El stared at him in complete shock. "H-Hawkins Lab?"

"I can't tell you why," Hopper said, "I don't know what they're listening to, but this is important. I have to find Joyce, can you-"

"Dad, the funeral's today."

Hopper swore. "Oh, shit. I mean, sorry, kid, I completely forgot. Is..."

"I can go alone, if you have stuff to do." El suggested, sounding a lot more casual about going to her best friend's funeral than he would have thought.

"If you think so..." Hopper said. "I'm going to search the office for bugs, then the house. Remember-"

"Don't talk to Hawkins Lab." El nodded. "Uh, once you get rid of the bugs, you wanna tell me what's going on?"

"Trust me, El, I will." Hopper said, though he wondered if that would be such a good idea; she tended to do whatever she wanted, and if she wanted to fight Hawkins Lab single-handedly, she would. And even if he managed to de-bug the house, he wasn't sure that he

wanted her *there*. “Listen, can you sleep over at someone else’s tonight? Maybe Nancy, her place is safe.”

El nodded. “I-I guess. I’ve gotta go, you let me know when everything’s alright, okay?”

Hopper nodded. “Stay safe.”

“You, too.” El nodded, and took off at a run. He stared after her, wondering where she’d go in such a hurry. The funeral wasn’t for two hours.

Either way, he had to make sure nobody could listen to him, and then he had to find Joyce.

Nancy sighed, looking at herself in the mirror. Her black dress was long and loose, her hair up in a ponytail. Nobody looking at her would be able to tell she was wearing normal clothing underneath, nor that the inside of her bag was lined with maps and poisons and her Dad’s gun.

She shouldered the bag and left her room, tiptoeing through the hall so as not to wake Holly; the poor girl was sensitive to sounds, and would wake up and cry at the slightest thing. Then her Mom would come running, and she she didn’t want to argue with her about disturbing her precious baby sister, who got more attention in the last three years than Nancy had in the last twelve.

Nancy walked down the stairs, glancing into the kitchen. She knew for a fact that her Dad was asleep on his chair in the Living Room, where he’d stay for most of the day. She didn’t expect, however, to see her Mom already at the sink, her hands deep in the suds rising from the water.

“Hey, Mom?” Nancy called, and it took Karen Wheeler a second to turn around. “I’m gonna go to the Funeral, then I’m gonna go to school. That okay?”

Karen nodded slowly, turning back to the sink.

“Do you need help?” Nancy asked, looking ahead.

“I’m fine.” Karen said flatly. “You go ahead.”

Nancy crept closer as her Mom pulled a dish out of the sink, water dripping off of it and onto the floor. “Are you sure? I probably have some time before I g-”

The clock chimed, startling them both. Karen dropped the plate, and the women watched as it shattered on the ground.

Nancy’s eyes widened, and she turned to her Mom, watching as Karen’s breathing quickened, her eyes not moving from the shattered plate on the floor. Nancy bent over, picking up the pieces and putting them carefully on the counter as Karen tried to steady her breath. She waited a few minutes, watching as her Mom eventually dragged herself back to reality, and turned back to the sink.

“You okay?” Nancy asked, knowing damn well that she wasn’t.

Karen nodded. “Yeah, sorry, just... had a nightmare last night.”

*When do you not?* Nancy thought, staring down at the floor. “I’m gonna leave now. Tell Dad I said ‘Good Morning’ if he ever wakes up.”

“I’ll do that.” Karen said.

“Have fun with Holly today.” Nancy added, before heading straight for the door.

Most people, she assumed, would be a bit worried if their day started out like this. But honestly, this was the most normal thing that had happened to her all week.

El had assumed the funeral would be hard to sit through, but not *this* hard.

Not only did she have to hear eulogies given to a girl still alive, watch Max’s Stepdad pretend to care, have to deal with Max’s Mom’s

smothering hugs, and have to watch a fake body lowered into the dirt... she had to make sure Mike and Lucas didn't do anything suspicious.

Her Dad had said he was gonna search the House, meaning the boys had to get out of the attic. She'd dressed them in their disguises again and brought them, all the while her nerves jumping up on her. She was not only terrified that someone would ask her who they were, she was terrified that someone at the funeral might work for the Lab; if they were the ones who faked Max's death, they might want to be at the funeral; though, hopefully, they had more important things to do.

She arrived alone, holding hands with Mike, who was also grabbing onto Lucas's arm. They were immediately greeted by Nancy, who ran up. She bent down to hug her, and whispered in her ear, "What are they doing here?"

"Couldn't stay in the house." El whispered back.

"Okay, have them sit closer to me." Nancy said. "After this, come with me to the store and fill me in."

They all sat down in chairs outside, watching as people got up to give speeches and talk about everything. Some more kids from school were there, though not that many, El noticed- and a lot of them looked like they'd been dragged by their parents. It took her til the third speech to notice that she was still holding Mike's hand. She considered letting go, but... no. She liked holding his hand, and if he didn't mind...

Slowly, she leaned over and put her head on his shoulder, staring up ahead. She felt Mike flinch a little, and was about to move, but instead of pulling away, Mike gripped her hand harder. She closed her eyes and let herself rest, trying to drown out the words.

Eventually the funeral did end, and the four of them stood up, prepared to go and skip the wake. However, El stopped, looking up. Mr. Clarke was there...

"Nancy, wait here, I'll be right back!" El said, rushing after him.



She'd released Mike's hand, but apparently that wasn't necessary, as when she turned to look behind her, the boy was following. Lucas stared at them for a second, before running after them as well.

Nancy gave them an exasperated look and threw her arms up. What were those kids *doing*?

She waited for a while, staring at the sky and bitching to herself, until she heard something behind her, and turned around to see someone approaching. She was about to reach into her bag to grab the gun handle, just in case, but relaxed when she saw it was only Jonathan.

"Hey, Jonathan." she said, smiling weakly. "Wh-what are you doing?"

"I was..." Jonathan looked awkward, glancing around, but then turned back to her. "Look, it's... have you seen my Mom?"

"Ms. Byers?" Nancy shook her head. "N-no."

Jonathan had an odd look in his eyes- worry? Yes, he looked worried. "She never came home last night, and she wasn't at the store. She wouldn't just *leave*, especially without telling me."

"What are you saying?" Nancy asked, realizing something was very *wrong*.

Jonathan looked at her. "If that... that *monster* thing... if it took Max and Barb, could it have taken my Mom, too?"

Nancy took a deep breath, staring over Jonathan's shoulder to avoid looking him in the eyes. Finally, she said, "Maybe."

Jonathan said, "I'm gonna check one more place, then can we meet my at my house instead of the store?"

"I don't know where that is."

Jonathan gave her the address, then said, "There's a key under the

mat if you get there before I do.”

Nancy nodded, then reached forwards and grabbed Jonathan’s hand. He flinched as she said, “Listen. We’re going to find her, and Barb, too.”

*And Max.*

As he nodded at her, Nancy let go of his hand, and smiled at him. “I’ll be there real soon.”

Jonathan left after that, saying some kind of thanks, and Nancy sat down in one of the chairs, waiting for the kids.

El ran up soon, her hand still entwined with Mike’s, Lucas trailing behind them. She looked to Nancy and said, “We’re on a tightrope!”

Nancy blinked at her. “What?”

“Mr. Clarke explained it!” she said. “We’re acrobats, and the tightrope is our dimension, but the Monster’s a flea, and there’s some kind of energy-gate that’s letting it pass.”

“*What?*”

El looked at the boys. “Yeah, we should probably find a spot to talk.”

Nancy nodded. “Come on, I’ve got a safe place for us to go.”

“Twelve?”

The boy looked up, his face brightening up as he heard Jonathan approach. He left the shack, jumping to his feet and hugging the teenager’s legs in greeting. When he pulled away, however, he saw that Jonathan looked upset. Why was he upset?

“Hey, I’ve got a question to ask you.” Jonathan said, kneeling down to get eye-level with the boy. “Is that okay?”

The boy nodded slowly; what did he want to know? What could he

*tell* him?

“That Monster you drew? What is it?”

Oh.

The boy shook his head.

“You won’t tell me?”

He shook again.

“You don’t know?”

Well, that was probably as close to the truth as they could get. The boy nodded.

“Do you know where it came from? What it does? How to stop it?”

He shook his head more, so fast that his hair was hitting his face. His body was starting to shake, too, and not from the cold. That *Thing*, he didn’t want to think about it, how it came, what it could *do*...

Jonathan put his hands on the boy’s shoulders, and he stopped moving, breathing heavily. “Hey, kid. It’s okay... it’s just, I think it might have... you know what? Don’t worry about it. Just stay in the shack, okay?”

The boy looked sadly at him; something was wrong. What was it? Why couldn’t he tell him?

“Has anyone else been in the woods?”

The boy shrugged. He was sure that *someone* had, but he hadn’t seen them. Eventually, Jonathan did hand him a bag of food and another water bottle, give him another hug, and then leave. Said he had something to do. The boy watched him go, sadness in his eyes.

He wanted to help. He wanted to make Jonathan happy again. But he had no idea how to do that.

And, with his luck, he’d probably make everything worse. He *always*

made everything worse.

It was only after Jonathan was gone that the boy realized he'd said nothing about the Others. Had he been looking for them? He thought he had been, but even if he was, it had been *days* since he'd seen them.

After a second, he reached into the Shack, pulling out Jonathan's coat and wrapping it around himself. He figured it would get a lot colder, and he was going to need the extra warmth.

If Jonathan couldn't find the Others, then the boy was going to do it himself.

## 21. The Compass

### CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

#### *The Compass*

“Where are we?” El asked, looking around.

Nancy picked up a welcome mat, grabbing a key off the floor and fiddling with the lock. “The Byers house. I need to meet Jonathan for a thing.”

She had been quiet on the walk over; El had done most of the talking, catching Nancy up on everything that had happened. She wasn’t sure how well she was taking it, but, well, she wasn’t entirely sure that she herself was taking it well, either.

“We should probably just wait in the kitchen.” Nancy said.

“Screw that, I’m gonna find a room to change in.” El said, gesturing down to her own black dress. “I’ve got a t-shirt in my bag.”

Nancy groaned. “Just remember, El, we’re in somebody else’s house.”

“Whatever.” El rolled her eyes, turning to go. She was already down the hall, grabbing a random door handles to try and find the bathroom, when she realized that Mike and Lucas had followed her.

“Guys, you should probably not come in with me.” El stated, finally turning a door and finding a restroom.

She walked in, turning to close the door, only to find Mike duck under her arm and run in. Lucas and El both groaned. “Really, Mike, it’s not that cool a room.” El said. “It’s like *our* bathroom, except you don’t have to sneak out of the attic to use it...”

However, she realized what was going on once she turned to look at him. Mike was staring at his own image in the mirror, his eyes wide. She realized that he hadn’t seen his full disguise before; they’d left for

school before she could show him yesterday, and he'd taken the wig and hat off when they arrived home. He looked at himself with some kind of wonder, smiling.

"Pretty." he said.

El looked at him, an involuntary grin spreading across her face. "Yeah." she said. "Really pretty."

Mike's face flushed, and he glanced at the ground shyly. El heard Lucas groan behind her, and she stuttered. "I- I mean, uh, yeah, you should probably go, I'm gonna change."

"Change?"

"Clothes."

Mike nodded, pushing back past her and standing by Lucas. El waved a little as she shut the door. Once it was closed, she put her head in her hands. Did she really just call him *pretty*? Goddamnit!

She changed quickly, shoving her dress into the bottom of her bag after she took it off and throwing on her jeans and t-shirt as fast as she could. She picked up her bag and walked out, jumping when she saw the boys sitting across the hall, staring into the air. Mike leaped up first, his eyes lighting up when he saw El. He looked at her new outfit as Lucas stood, pointing at her and saying, "Pretty!"

El smiled. "Thanks, Mike."

Lucas looked between them, before rolling his eyes and wandering off.

"Wait, Lucas, hold up!" El said, rushing forwards as Lucas picked a random door and walked through. Mike followed them into the room, closing the door carefully behind them.

El looked around the room as Lucas moved to sit on the floor, looking up at the ceiling. It looked like an office, but something was off, something she couldn't put her finger on. After a second, she figured sat beside Lucas, smiling a little wider when Mike plopped down next to her.

“So, what do we do?” she asked.

When neither boy responded, she started talking. “I guess we should find the Gate. If we can find the Gate, we can get to Max.”

Mike looked away from her, staring at the floor. Lucas continued to glare at the ceiling.

“Ugh, we should probably find Nancy right now-”

Before she could finish that thought, she heard a door open. She jumped to her feet, panicking, as she heard Nancy say something. Who was there? Did Nancy mention someone coming over? She hadn’t really been paying attention. She had mentioned something about Ms. Byers, was that what they were doing? Waiting for her? Maybe...

She ran forwards, locking the door. She turned back to the boys, saying, “Okay, we’re gonna stay here for now until we can find out who that is. I mean, it’s probably one of the Byers, cause Nancy said we were in their house, but...”

The boys looked at her; Mike looked scared, but Lucas simply looked protective, moving closer to Mike and glaring at the door.

“So...” El said. “Let’s go back to the- *Magnets!*”

The boys gave her an odd look as she started to dig through her bag. She pulled out a compass, smiling wide as she saw the needle pointing away from North.

“See this?” El showed the boys, before getting to her feet and peering out the window, checking to make sure she was right at the needle being in the wrong direction. “The needle always points to True North, sensing the magnetic North Pole. If there’s a powerful magnet nearby, though, it’ll change directions. And Mr. Clarke said that the Gate would disrupt the electromagnetic field, so if we follow this Compass’ north, we’ll get to the Gate!”

She didn’t notice Mike and Lucas exchange panicked looks behind her; she was too excited. “We’ll find the Gate, and we’ll find *Max!*”

She threw her arms out, and hit the chalkboard. It toppled off the wall, crashing onto the floor. She turned to the boys, who had both leapt to their feet at the sudden noise, and ran her hands through her hair.

“Shit.”

“Jonathan!”

Nancy stood up, smiling as Jonathan walked in. He blinked, surprised to see her in more casual clothing, and said, “Hey.”

“Did you find anything?”

He shook his head, and Nancy sat down again, her face falling. Jonathan sat next to her, and she said, “So, here’s my plan.”

“Okay.”

“We go into the woods, find the thing, and shoot it dead.”

Jonathan blinked. “Oh... yeah, I mean, that works.”

She paused, wondering how much she could tell him, before saying, “And... if it has your Mom... well, it’s kinda hard to explain, but I might know where she is, but hell if I know how to get there.”

“What?”

“Well... you see, we’re on a tightrope...”

There was a crash in another room. Jonathan’s eyes widened, turning towards the hallway and saying, “What the hell...?”

Nancy groaned. She’d forgotten the others.

The lock jiggled, and El jumped. “Who’s there?” came a boy’s voice that she didn’t recognize.



“Time to go!” El yelled, not thinking, and rushing to the window, throwing it open. She had one leg already out when she heard another voice from the hall.

“El Hopper, open this door!” came Nancy’s voice, and El paused.

“Uh...” she said. “Nancy?”

“*Move your ass!*”

El sighed with relief, climbing back in the room and unlocking the door. “Hey, Nance!” she said brightly.

“What the *hell* did you do?” Nancy asked, walking forwards, her eyes falling on the chalkboard on the ground. “Jesus Christ, El, what were you doing?”

“I figured it out, Nance!” El said, as a teenage boy walked in behind her, looking around, and Lucas and Mike moved behind her, “The Gate has disrupted the electromagnetic field, meaning that my Compass will point right at it! If we find the Gate...”

“We’ll find the Monster.” Nancy said.

“And Max!” El nodded.

“And Barb!”

Nancy looked relieved, running forwards and hugging El. “Yes! We’re gonna find them!”

“We’re gonna find them!”

Nancy pulled away, turning to the boy behind her. “Jonathan, we can get to your- Jonathan?”

Jonathan was staring at the two boys, completely shocked. El glanced behind her, to see that Lucas had grabbed Mike’s arm again, moving in front of him and sending his death glare towards the teenage boy.

“Uh, Jonathan, you okay?” Nancy asked.

Jonathan looked at the boys, and said, "Oh my God. I know you two."

"What?" El asked, as Lucas jumped in front of her, too, holding his hands out to block the two kids behind him.

Jonathan didn't look concerned at this, simply pointing at Lucas and saying, "You're Nine, right?"

It was El and Nancy's turn to stare, now. "How-?" Nancy began.

Lucas looked back to Mike, who slowly moved in front of El as well, looking ready to fight.

Jonathan finally picked up on this, backing up a little. "Whoa! Whoa, I'm not gonna hurt you. I know your friend!"

Lucas and Mike froze, looking at Jonathan. He continued, "Twelve, right? You guys know Twelve?"

"Twelve..." Mike repeated, immediately dropping his fighting stance, looking hopeful. "Twelve is safe?"

"Yeah!" Jonathan nodded. "I can show you where he is-"

"Are you safe?" Lucas asked, eyes narrowing.

Jonathan looked puzzled. "Uh...?"

"Can we..." Lucas tried to rephrase himself. "Can we trust you?"

After a second, Jonathan nodded.

"Uh, hi?" Nancy said, raising her arm slightly to draw everyone's attention to her. "Hi, quick question, what the *hell* is going on?"

"Uh..." Jonathan glanced around, realizing that he hadn't completely caught her up on everything. "Well, I've kinda been... hiding their friend in the forest for a few days?"

Mike walked a little closer to Jonathan, asking, "Ten?"

"Huh?"

“Hiding Ten?”

Jonathan shook his head. “I’m... I’m sorry, kid, I’ve only got Twelve.”

Lucas still looked doubtful, running up and grabbing Mike by the arm, dragging him back behind him.

“So...” El said, glancing between everyone. “Uh, I think first we should... should go get Twelve, and then we should go find the Gate.”

She noticed, this time, that Mike and Lucas flinched when she mentioned the Gate; however, she simply gave them a look and didn’t say anything.

“Sorry, what’s the Gate?” Jonathan asked.

Nancy and El glanced at each other, wondering how exactly to catch him up, when Nancy turned to the Chalkboard on the floor, gesturing for him to come closer. “I can explain where the Monster comes from.” Nancy said, grabbing the board. “See, our Universe is here, right?” she pointed at it.

“Yeah.” Jonathan nodded, confused.

“The Monster...” Nancy said. “Comes from here.”

She flipped the board, expecting the other side to be just wood.

She was wrong.

The teenagers’ eyes widened as she dropped the board, revealing a huge Conspiracy Map laid out. They stared in complete shock for what felt like a minute, and then El said, “What the *hell* is this?”

Nancy propped the board against the wall, and they all crowded around, scanning the Map. There were lots of pictures of Hawkins Lab, different scientists, newspaper clippings... what *was* this?

“That’s Mom’s handwriting...” Jonathan said. “Why... why does she have this?”

"Maybe she knew something about the Upside-Down..." Nancy said aloud, starting to trace the string. "Maybe she tried to fight the Monster or something..."

"Upside-Down?" Jonathan asked. "Is that the Monster's...?"

Nancy nodded. "It's like another dimension. It's where Max and Barb are, and if your Mom..."

"Papa."

They all turned around, to see Mike, his eyes wide, staring at a section of the map. El followed his gaze, seeing a picture of a man, labelled *Brenner*. She pointed to it, turning to Mike. "What?"

"Papa." Mike nodded, looking... did he look *scared*? Lucas had the same expression, backing up a little, as if the picture itself could hurt him.

"That's your Dad?" El asked.

Suddenly, Jonathan said, "Wait."

Nancy turned to him. "What?"

Jonathan pointed, to the picture of Brenner, moving his finger to a string in the corner, following it to a notecard reading *Will*.

"Who's Will?" El asked.

Jonathan paused, before saying, "He- he was my younger brother. He... he was stillborn, my Mom still has his Baby Stuff stored somewhere here, she thought... why is *he* on the Board...?"

Nancy's eyes widened. "Oh, God." she said, an idea forming in her head.

"What?"

Nancy turned to Jonathan, before shaking her head; no, no, that couldn't be right. "Nothing, nevermind."

Jonathan looked to the board again, and said, "I don't know why this would be in here, I didn't think my Mom cared about this Lab thing..."

"Well, apparently she does." El said, crossing her arms. "If she knew about Hawkins Lab..." she paused, thinking back to that morning. Her Dad had said to avoid the Lab... and asked where Joyce was... But he was looking for Max, right? And he said Joyce had a lead... oh.

Oh *shit*.

"Mike," El asked, turning around and looking the boy in the eyes. "Does the Lab have something to do with the Gate?"

Mike's eyes widened, and he opened his mouth, looking like he wanted to say something, but something was stopping him. He shivered a little, before looking back at El, his eyes betraying his terror. What could he be scared of?

Suddenly, Lucas pushed past them, grabbing the board and pushing it aside. "Hey!" El yelled, as the teenagers also yelled something.

"Doesn't matter." Lucas crossed his arms. "Find Twelve."

"Lucas-" El began.

Lucas shook his head. "*Find Twelve.*"

They looked at each other, and El finally said, "Yeah. Let's get Twelve, and find the Gate, and get everyone back, and then we can talk about why your Mom is has a secret conspiracy map."

Jonathan nodded, standing up. "Yeah, yeah. Let's get to the kid."

They left the Map behind, glancing back occasionally as they left the room. El briefly noticed Lucas grab Mike's arm again as they left, whispering, "Safe..."

She knew now they were hiding something.

If only she could figure out what.

## 22. Almost Dark

### Notes for the Chapter:

So, you may have noticed that under the "chapters" thing, there is now a "36" instead of a "?". That is because I have technically finished the fic; of course, I'll be editing through it, but long story short, it is pretty much done. (Meaning, yes, I know when Dustin is coming.) I'll still be posting a chapter a day, but this means I'll be working on the planning stages for Season 2. (Which, uh, means I have no idea what I'm doing with Bob, or Billy or anything, but that's what the planning stage is for!)

### CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

#### *Almost Dark*

Steve knocked on the door and waited.

He bounced on his feet, waiting for it to open. Should he have brought flowers? No, it's not like he had time anyway...

The door opened, and Steve found himself face-to-face with Karen Wheeler. She was holding a three-year-old girl on her hip, looking confused at this highschooler on her porch.

"Uh, hi." Steve said. "Is... is Nancy home?"

Karen looked at him, confused. "I'm sorry, who are you?"

"Um, I'm Steve Harrington." Steve said, wondering if he should shake her hand or something. "I'm Nancy's... classmate. Are you... Ms. Wheeler?"

Karen gave him a look. "Sorry, hon, Nancy's not home right now."

"Oh. Do you know where she is?" He tried not to look too

disappointed as he asked.

“Yeah.” Karen nodded. “She went to Maxine Mayfield’s funeral, and then she was going to school.”

Steve decided not to tell her that school was already over, and even if it wasn’t, Nancy hadn’t been there all day. “Okay.” Steve nodded. “Thanks, Ms. Wheeler.”

He turned to go, waiting until he heard the door close to start running. He jumped into his car and slammed his head on the wheel. He wanted to apologize for the shit he’d said yesterday, explain what was going on- if he *could* - but Nancy was nowhere to be found.

Where the *hell* was she?

“Are you sure you know where we’re going?” Nancy asked, trailing behind Jonathan as they walked.

“Of course.” Jonathan nodded. “He’s been living in a fort my Mom and I built when I was a kid. It’s not too far off from here.”

As Nancy sighed and walked faster to keep pace with him, El slowed a bit so she would be level with the boys, who’d been trailing behind everyone. She looked carefully at them as they walked; Lucas had his usual glare, but Mike was just staring at the ground, some sort of sadness in his eyes.

“So...” El said, glancing between them and the teenagers ahead. “Mike, you... you saw the Monster before?”

There was a flash of panic in Mike’s eyes, but he nodded.

“Did... did you see it at the Gate?”

Mike turned to Lucas, and El couldn’t catch his expression. Lucas simply turned to El and said, “No.”

There was a pause, before El said, “Lucas? Friends don’t lie.”

Lucas looked at her, and very simply said, “Not friends.”

El flinched at the words, as Lucas stared ahead, not looking her in the eye. Mike glanced at El, looking sympathetic, and he reached over and grabbed her hand. She glanced at Lucas, leaned in a little closer to Mike, and said, “Mike, is there something you can’t tell me?”

Mike avoided her eyes, but nodded.

“Does it have to do with Max?”

He stiffened, trying even harder to not look at her. That was the answer she needed.

“Mike...” El began, but she didn’t know what to say.

“We’re here!” Jonathan announced, pointing ahead, and El looked up to see a clearing past the next few trees, a makeshift shack placed in the center.

In a flash, Mike let go of El’s hand, and he and Lucas raced forwards, pushing past the teens and running to the shed. However, when El sped up a little to catch up, she stopped herself next to the teens, catching Jonathan’s look of concern.

“What?” Nancy asked before El could.

Jonathan shook his head. “Something’s wrong. He usually comes running out when he hears me coming...”

Lucas and Mike, who had been looking in the Shack, turned back to Jonathan; Mike looked disappointed, and Lucas looked downright furious. “Where’s Twelve?” Lucas asked.

“He’s not there?” Jonathan asked.

Lucas stepped closer, moving in front of Mike; El stepped backwards a little. He looked more angry than she’d seen him.

“Where’s *Twelve*?” he asked again.

“I left him here.” Jonathan said, walking forwards. “He’s been here



the last few days, I don't know why he wouldn't be-"

"He's *gone!*" Lucas shouted, using one of his hands to push Mike backwards and another to hold out his hand towards Jonathan, causing the surprised teen to stop in his tracks.

"Lucas..." El said, walking forwards, leaving Nancy behind her in the woods. "Lucas, calm down, Twelve probably just wandered off..."

"Twelve wouldn't do that..." Mike said quietly, only just loud enough for her to hear.

"You said Twelve was here." Lucas said, his anger growing. "You said he was safe!"

El started to walk closer, passing Jonathan now. "Lucas, calm down..."

Lucas suddenly put his hands together, facing her, and shut his eyes tight. El stopped, staring, as the light around Lucas started to disappear.

Starting at his feet, blackness started to surround him, spreading into the sky and stopping only just below the trees, the light just fading into nothing. The darkness started to spread farther, a circle of black moving farther away from its center, closer and closer to her. El started to retreat backwards, stumbling and almost falling over herself. What the *hell* was Lucas doing? She had no idea that he *could* do something like this...

Suddenly, the darkness stopped moving. Only for a second, it laid suspended just a few inches away from her. Suddenly, it retreated, falling back and letting the light shine through. Before El could even say anything, she saw it all retreat to a form flying through the air, which quickly revealed itself to be Lucas, who hit a tree and crumpled to the ground. El gasped, and whipped around to where he had been standing, only to see Mike, breathing heavily and wiping blood away from his nose.

It only took her a second to figure out what had happened: Lucas had tried to do something, maybe something to hurt them. And Mike had

stopped him.

Lucas sat up, looking more confused and hurt than angry now. He looked at Mike, a spark of betrayal showing in his eyes, and he leapt to his feet and ran into the woods.

“*Nine!*” Mike yelled, rushing after him. “Nine, wait!”

“Mike, stop!” El said as the boy passed her, and ran after him.

“Kids!” Nancy yelled, too, as they all disappeared into the forest.

El ran past the trees, trying to follow Mike’s dark shirt through the trees as he raced away from her. She kept running, wanting to yell at him again to stop, to wait, but she needed to save her breath. She was still running, rushing around roots and ducking under branches. Mike somehow ran faster, his feet almost flying. She couldn’t see Lucas anymore, she wondered if Mike could.

She thought she heard something, and turned around to check, not paying attention to what was ahead of her, which was a mistake. Her foot caught a root, and she toppled to the ground. She landed flat on her face, her body shaking with the shock. She scrambled to her feet as fast as she could, but not quite fast enough. Once she made it up, she realized that Mike was gone.

She turned around, looking behind her, and realized that the clearing was gone, too. She couldn’t see Nancy or Jonathan, or Lucas or Mike. She turned around, and yelled, “Mike!”

She didn’t know what she was hoping; did she expect him to just walk back to her? Did she expect him to come out of the trees, a “just joking” smile on his face?

Whatever she expected, he didn’t come back.

She stood there for a few minutes, trying to keep her panic down. She was alone in the woods, with a Monster on the loose, and no friends, and no sense of direction.

Wait... she did have something.

She pulled out her compass, watching as the needle pointed away from True North. She steadied herself, closed her eyes, and walked in the direction she was pointed.

If she had to find the Gate alone, she would.

Joyce was really starting to hate her life.

She sat in the cold, dark, room, really wishing she had a cigarette. Or, really, anything to help pass the time.

She'd been sitting there for as long as she'd been awake- it had to be *hours*. There were two simple chairs in the middle of the room, at either side of a cold, metal table. Aside from that, the room was empty. Of course, she knew what the room was. She'd probably been in here before. True, it was hard to remember everything back then, and she really didn't want most of those memories to resurface. But she knew why she was there. It was to put her on edge, to make her scared, to make her complacent.

Well, that sure as hell wasn't going to happen.

There was a buzz, and she turned her head to the door, to see it unlock. She got to her feet, wondering if she'd have a chance to burst through the door and make a run for it. She probably wouldn't make it far, but she could try.

Then *he* walked in.

Joyce narrowed her eyes, anger boiling over inside her. How *dare* he just walk in, looking at her with that stupid, expressionless face, as if she wasn't a human, as if he didn't know exactly what he'd done to her.

"Brenner." she said, a cold, threatening tone to her voice.

"Joyce Byers." he said, no emotion showing.

He sat in the other chair, looking at her as if he expected her to sit. She glanced at the door; it had shut behind him, then looked back to

him. She considered standing, just to spite him, but her legs still hurt; they'd been hurting since she woke up. She sat, giving him a dark glare.

"Why the hell am I here?" she asked.

"We could ask you the same question." Brenner responded. "You broke into *our* Lab, Ms. Byers."

Joyce's heart skipped a beat. Had they caught Hopper, too? Was he here? She considered asking, but she knew for a fact he wouldn't give her a straight answer.

"You know damn well why I came."

Brenner gave her a look. "Really, Ms. Byers?"

She stayed silent. He could play dumb all he wanted, she knew he wanted her to say something, and she wasn't going to give him the satisfaction.

Finally, he said, "We thought we made it clear that you were to say nothing about our organization."

"You did." Joyce said. "I just didn't care."

Brenner sighed. "Ms. Byers, we can't let you telling people whatever you choose to believe about our Laboratory."

"So, what are you going to do?" Joyce asked, leaning back in the chair. "Kill me? That'd be easy to cover up, I'm sure."

"We're going to leave you here," Brenner said slowly, "Until you agree to stop with your lies."

"Lies?" Joyce raised her eyebrow. "Are you deluding yourself, or hoping to convince me that I'm crazy?"

"Ms. Byers, we just want you to stop spreading misinformation about us."

Joyce leaned forwards, and said very calmly, "I want to see him."

Brenner simply looked at her, still emotionless.

“I want to see my son.”

He said nothing, simply standing up. “I’ll see you tomorrow, Ms. Byers. We can talk again.”

Joyce glared at him, letting all her hate flow into her eyes. Right before he left, she said, “You’re still Red, Brenner.”

He turned, giving her a slightly puzzled look. “What?”

“Nothing.” Joyce sighed, turning back around in her chair and staring away from him. She waited until the door shut to wipe her nosebleed away on her sleeve.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

[Seriously though why don't we talk about the fact that Terry Ives canonically has powers??? Did we all just forget that]

## 23. Alone

### CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

#### *Alone*

Mike was alone again.

He hadn't intended to hurt Lucas. He had been surrounded by darkness, and he started panicking because he knew *exactly* what he was doing. It was the power he'd never shown the Doctors, the power he said he would one day use to set them free, but they'd gotten out before then. He knew, too, that he was aiming at El. Even if he just wanted to hit Jonathan, El was in front of him. He didn't want him to hurt El, El was his *friend*- and Lucas's friend, too, even if he didn't say so. So he wanted him to stop, he just wanted to push him a little, to break his concentration and talk him out of his anger. But he was scared, and he pushed too hard, and Lucas got hurt. And now Lucas left him alone, and he couldn't find El or Nancy or even Jonathan, and he couldn't find *Twelve*. Poor Twelve, he was always the quiet one, the shy one, the one who never wanted to hurt anyone, he couldn't understand why they couldn't all just get along. And now he was alone, in the woods, with no food, and a Monster running around.

So was Ten. And nobody had seen Ten, not even Jonathan. What if he was still alone? What if the Lab had gotten to him before they could? What if the Monster...

Mike curled up, burying his head in his knees, and cried.

*Papa told him it was important.*

*He was going to go far, he said. Farther than he'd ever gone before. Into the Bath, to look for a man in a photo. He was just supposed to repeat what he said.*

*Papa asked if it was okay. He said yes. What else was he supposed to say?*

*He'd been put in a suit, one that wouldn't get wet. He was taken to the room he'd only been in a few times before; only for "test runs", as Papa called them, where the Doctors would put wires on his head and put him in a tube of water, to see how it would go. But now was the real thing. No more test runs.*

*He wanted the Others there. He wanted them to be with him. He knew that was impossible. If he acknowledged their existence, he'd have to tell Papa that he broke a rule. That he talked to them. And that would get the Others in trouble, as well as him. So he kept silent.*

*They put the wires on his head, and a sphere over those, to help him breathe in the water. He was lowered into the water, then, his hands gripping two poles until he was fully submerged. He could see the outline of Papa outside the tub, until the doors closed.*

*And then it was dark.*

*It was so dark. He closed his eyes, tried to focus. Tried to go to the Mind Place. It took him longer than he thought, but finally, after several minutes of nothing, he opened his eyes, and there was no water, there was no Papa, and he was alone.*

*He walked among a room of black until he heard speaking. Someone was speaking. It was words he'd never heard before, in a voice he didn't know. He walked towards it, seeing the outline of the man in the picture. He'd found him. He'd succeeded.*

*He started to do what he did in the other tests, focus only on his words and repeating them in his head. He knew that would help Papa hear them. Hear the words. That's what Papa wanted.*

*His focus was broken, however, when he heard a roar.*

*He didn't notice the man's image disappear next to him; he simply turned, looking towards the growls. He walked closer, wondering what it could be. He'd never heard that before. He hadn't heard anything like it before...*

*Then he saw the mouth. It opened wide, teeth lining the inside. It roared at him, screamed at him. It saw him. It saw him.*

*He turned and ran, running away, running into the blackness, his mind racing. He felt feeling rushing back into him, the feeling of water and cold.*

*He was back in the dark bath. And he was screaming. Screaming and sobbing.*

Mike felt a hand on his shoulder. He looked up, tears streaming from his face, to see Lucas. They stared at each other for several seconds, the time ticking by as if it was an eternity. Mike was still crying.

Finally, he burst into louder sobs, staring his friend in the eyes. "I'm sorry!" he cried.

"I'm sorry." Lucas said quietly, then reached forwards and hugged him.

There were no hugs in the Lab. Physical contact was limited, and it usually wasn't pleasant; it was being poked and prodded and thrown into solitude. The only friendly embraces given were between the boys in their secret meetings, when Ten thought it was safe, when they crawled through the vents to each others' rooms. And those were sparing, as they would have to be quick before a Guard came to check on them, or before the Cameras turned back on, or before the Tests began. But Mike loved when he was hugged, when someone touched him without hurting him. It was a rarity, something forbidden to him, should he get too emotional and forget what he was supposed to do.

But they were hugging now. They were hugging, and Mike was crying, and he thought Lucas was crying, too. They held each other for a long time, just happy that they were *together*.

After a second, Lucas said, "Come on. Let's find the Others."

Mike nodded, eyes shut, and he slowly pulled away, stumbling to his feet and grabbing Lucas's arm. The two of them walked through the woods as the sky darkened, sticking together.



Hopper hadn't been in the office much that day. He'd been searching it for bugs- and managed to find a few- until the other Officers arrived, then he went to the Byers House, only finding it empty. Donald Melvad, the owner of the General Store, said that she didn't come into work that day. She hadn't called in sick or anything, and nobody knew where she was.

Hopper, however, knew *exactly* where she was.

He couldn't just go up and ask for her back, though, he knew that. The people at the Lab would be prepared for him; they'd apparently bugged the Office, and maybe his house. It wouldn't be safe to go back there, but it wouldn't be safe to go to the Lab. He had nowhere to go, but he had to make some kind of plan to save Joyce. There was no way in hell he was leaving her there.

He started the car, driving off. His only plan right now was to get out of Hawkins, find a hotel somewhere, and plan how to get into the Lab and get Joyce out.

He probably should have brought El, but she wasn't safe with him. He expected that he was being watched, and he didn't want her getting mixed up in this. She'd probably be safe with Nancy. He hoped she'd be safe with her.

Right now, he had to find Max. The girl was trapped somewhere, all alone, but apparently hiding from some kind of Monster. And she seemed *terrified* of it. If Max was scared of it, it must be bad. He remembered one time a few years back, when she'd been sleeping over with El, and broke into his hidden files. He'd come home to find her on the ground, sorting through Crime Scene Photos by which looked the most bloody.

"I didn't mean to mess up your stuff," Max had explained when he made her put it all back. "I just wanted to look. I was thinking about how you must have the coolest job in the world."

"Not really." Hopper had shaken his head, watching as she started re-stacking the files in a box. "Especially here."

"Yeah, it's pretty boring." Max said. "Was it cool in the big city?"

“Hmm... a little.”

“I was just thinking it might be cool to, I dunno, be a cop.”

“Well...” Hopper sighed, bending down to help her pick the box back up, to stuff in the back of the closet, “It’s not as cool as it looks on TV. There’s boring paperwork, and annoying partners, and you’ve gotta touch a lot of gross stuff.”

Max had turned her nose up at that; she *really* didn’t like gross things. However, she shrugged and said, “But, like, you get to arrest bad guys and stuff? Do you get to beat em up?”

“You try to avoid it.”

“Still, you get to take care of people.” Max said. “You get to save people from burglars and murderers and shitty parents and...” She shook her head, stopping there. Hopper had frowned at that; she knew Max wasn’t too fond of her Stepfather, but she tended not to talk about her home life much. Before he could ask about anything, she simply said, “Well, it’s not like I care that much about the future.”

She’d turned to go, but he stopped her. “Look, if you want to stop by the station at any point, just come in with El after school. I’m sure Powell and Callahan would love to answer whatever questions you have about gory murders and stuff.”

Max’s face lit up, and she ran back to hug him.

That seemed so long ago now. Now she was stuck in an alternate dimension, and El couldn’t go home, and the station wasn’t safe, and all Hopper could do was drive away.

El followed the Compass, the needle pointing her way. She didn’t know how long she’d been walking, or how long she’d be in the woods. It was dark, now, though, so that told her all she needed to know. It didn’t matter, anyway. Once she found the Gate, she’d find Max, and then everything would be alright.

But it wouldn't. Mike and Lucas were gone, and she didn't know when she'd find them again. She missed them already. She missed hearing their footsteps behind her. It was weird, but she missed seeing Lucas's glares, too, missed the boy's protectiveness and confidence. And she missed feeling Mike's hand in hers. She missed seeing his adorable smile, a smile that brightened his entire face. He always smiled when he saw her, and she always felt herself smile thinking about him.

She suddenly heard something behind her, and she stopped, whipping around. "Mike?"

It sounded like a voice, in the distance. She walked towards it, ignoring the compass. She started to run, her feet taking her forwards. "Mike?"

She figured out pretty quick that it wasn't Mike; the voice was too deep for that. It hit her a few seconds later who it was, and she slowed down, confusion spreading to her expression.

"Jonathan?" she called, her voice raising.

She ran closer, hearing Jonathan's voice clearing now. He was calling for Nancy? Where was *Nancy*?

"Jonathan!" El called again, running closer. She could see him now, running among the trees, a flashlight in hand. When had he found time to get a flashlight?

"El!" Jonathan said, shining a light at the girl. "El, Nancy's gone!"

"*Gone?*" El yelled back.

Suddenly, they heard a voice, in the distance. "*Jonathan!*"

"Nancy!" Jonathan called back. "Nancy, where are you?"

She sounded terrified. "Jonathan, I'm right here! I'm *right here!*"

"Follow my voice, Nancy!" Jonathan yelled, running towards where he thought the sound was coming from. El followed, too scared and tired to yell with him. "I'm coming!"

They ran, then. El wasn't sure where they were going; even if it wasn't dark, she didn't think she'd ever been in this part of the woods before.

Jonathan stopped in front of a tree, and it took El a second to catch her breath and realize why. There was a gaping hole in the center, something sticky growing out of it. "Nancy, follow my voice!" Jonathan yelled again, shining a light into the hole.

"What is that?" El asked, looking to it. "What's going on? *Nancy!*"

Something roared.

They both stopped, staring at the hole in horror, and Jonathan yelled again, "Nancy!"

A hand burst from the tree, and Jonathan fell backwards in shock, dropping the light. El screamed, jumping back.

"Jonathan!" Nancy called again, but this time it wasn't distant, it was *there*, it was her hand, and Jonathan reacted before El could, reaching out and pulling on her arm. El rushed forwards to help, and they pulled on the hand, something wet and slimy still remaining on the teenage girl.

Suddenly, Nancy burst out, landing on top of Jonathan as something roared behind her. She was covered, head-to-toe, in the slime. El gasped, rushing forwards. "Nancy, what happened?"

Nancy didn't answer; she just grabbed onto Jonathan and started sobbing.

El turned back to the tree, picking up Jonathan's flashlight as she did, to look back at the hole.

The hole was gone.

## 24. A Break

### Notes for the Chapter:

Yo, guess who's finished the planning stage for Season 2 and started writing? THIS GUY

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

#### *A Break*

El walked into the room, slamming the door behind her. “Okay, I tried to call your house again, Jonathan, and no one answered. My Dad won’t respond to my calls, either.”

Jonathan looked up; he had his arm around Nancy, who was leaning on his shoulder, still looking shell-shocked from what had happened. Jonathan told El that they’d been looking for the kids all day- to no avail- but Nancy had found a deer carcass, which got dragged into the hole in the tree, and she’d followed. She hadn’t said anything until they made it back to her house; Jonathan and El had decided it was best to get her somewhere safe. All Nancy had been able to tell the two was that she’d fallen into some kind of dark place, with the Monster she’d seen, eating the deer.

“Is it the Upside-Down?” El had asked, excited. “Nance, was anyone else there?”

Nancy hadn’t responded, instead choosing to sit down and stare at the wall.

“Do you want me to call the other officers?” El asked, sitting down next to the two teenagers on Nancy’s bed and directing her question at the boy. “To report your Mom missing?”

Jonathan shook his head, seemingly thinking about something. After a second, Nancy stood, glancing at the other two. “I’m gonna take a shower.” she said. “Get all this dirt off. El, there’s a sleeping bag in the closet. You can sleep on the floor, or in the basement. Holly’s the

only one who goes down there, and she's in bed right now. And if you don't want my parents to know you're here, just don't talk to them."

El nodded, and waited until Nancy left to turn back to Jonathan. "So, uh, are you gonna stay, too?"

Jonathan blinked. "Uh, I... I feel like I should, I don't want to leave her alone... a-and I'm not sure my house is safe."

"From what?" El asked. "The Monster?"

Jonathan considered a second, glancing between her and the door, before saying, "I... I'm not sure. I was worried... I thought, maybe, when I couldn't find my Mom, that the Monster got her, too, but... I'm not sure."

"Not sure?"

"My Mom's not the kind of person who would crawl into a hole she found in the woods." Jonathan explained. "And... and I've been thinking about that Map we found in the house, and about Will and..."

"You think someone else kidnapped your Mom?"

Jonathan shrugged and sighed, burying his head in his hands. "I don't *know*, I don't know."

El shrugged. "Well, if... if you want to report that your Mom's gone, I can get you to the other Officers real fast."

"Yeah, you're the Chief's kid, right?" Jonathan asked.

El nodded.

"So..." Jonathan asked, looking at her carefully. "Do you... you have a Mom?"

She could tell instantly that he regretted his phrasing; his eyes flashed embarrassment, and he glanced away awkwardly.

“Yeah, I had a Mother.” El nodded.

“Uh...” Jonathan said. “Uh, where’s... I mean, if you don’t-”

“It’s okay, she’s dead.” El said simply.

“Oh...” If the boy could look more awkward, he would probably turn completely red. “Oh, I...”

“I think my Father’s dead, too.” El said, causing Jonathan to jump. “I’m not sure, though. Never met the guy.”

“Oh, you’re...”

El gave him a look. “Yeah, I’m adopted. It’s not much of a secret, Jonathan, Dad and I don’t look anything alike.”

Jonathan looked her over. “I mean, kinda, you’re both...”

“White?”

“I was going to say ‘brunette’...” He paused. “So... how’d that happen?”

El shrugged. “I don’t remember anything, I just know what Dad told me. I was about two years old, my Mom and her sister were in the Big City and their place got robbed. They both got shot, but I was asleep in the other room so they left me alone. Dad was a Police Officer over there at the time, so they stuck me with him while he worked the case and they tried to track down my Father and other family. By the time they figured out I had no one else, Dad got attached. And, well, when he and Diane got divorced, she didn’t want me. I reminded her too much of Sara.”

El remembered Diane and Sara more than she remembered her own family. True, Sara had died when she was very young, but she did remember playing princesses with her, and of Hopper and Diana yelling in the hallways while she was trying to sleep. Honestly, Diane never really clicked with El; she liked her fine, but she found her a bit odd, and after Sara went to the Hospital and didn’t come back, El figured she reminded her too much of her lost daughter.

Jonathan didn't say anything- even though she guessed he had no idea who Sara even was- so El continued. "I really don't know anything about my Mom. I probably could ask Dad, I don't think there's any reason he wouldn't tell me, but I don't wanna bother him. Besides, it doesn't really matter. I've got my Dad, I'm fine with him."

She glanced out the window, curling up. "I... I think he's figured out something about the Lab." She sighed, and said, "He mentioned your Mom, too. Asked me if I'd seen her. She'd had a lead for him about Max, I think they're both in on this."

They were silent for a few seconds, until Jonathan finally voiced her thoughts. "Wait, so you think they're at Hawkins Lab?"

"If they're not, they know something about it." El said. "Your Mom's even got the Conspiracy Map about it."

Jonathan sighed. "Yeah... yeah, that was kinda a shock. I didn't think she'd want anything to do with, really, anything weird. But from what you said about the Lab, and the boys..."

El's heart skipped at the mention of them. She *really* wanted to get back into the woods, to try and find them, to find Twelve and Lucas and *Mike*, but... well, she needed to help Nancy.

"Did Nine and Eleven tell you anything about the Lab?" Jonathan asked. "About what happened to them there?"

"Not much." El shook her head. "I know that's where they come from, and they really didn't want to go back. I think they were test subjects, experiments."

"That would explain a lot about Twelve." Jonathan said. "I'm not sure the poor kid could even talk. I... I feel so bad that he ran off. I was supposed to protect him, and he trusted me..."

El wasn't really in the mood to talk about the boys anymore. She stood up. "Listen, I'm gonna... I'm gonna sneak into the basement. I know the way, Max and I snuck down there a couple times whenever we didn't want to study. If you need anything, get Nancy's walkie-talkie, it'll be set on our channel."



Jonathan nodded at her as she left. She closed the door behind her, and took a deep breath. She grabbed her bag from where she'd left it in the hallway, and sighed. She should probably get some sleep, but the boys were still in the woods, all alone.

She wasn't going to sleep, she bet, but she could at least get some rest.

Hopper had no plan.

He stopped by the Byers place one more time before he left, his sliver of hope that maybe Joyce had just gotten sick and slept in disappearing quite quickly. He was, however, very worried to discover that her son wasn't home, either. He didn't know if Jonathan had tried to find his Mom or if the Lab had gotten to him first, but either way, he wasn't there. He figured it might be a coincidence-maybe the kid had a friend's house he was staying at- until he realized the door was unlocked, and when he checked Joyce's office, he saw the Conspiracy Board propped against the wall, completely visible to anyone who walked into the house. He fixed it back on the wall, and then dug through the other drawers, looking for false bottoms. He found three, and shoved the papers inside into his coat, and then he got the hell out of the house.

He made it to another city, walked into a hotel and smiled, pretended like he was just on a trip to see his sister who didn't exist, and got a room. He looked around the place afterwards, checking for microphones and glancing out the window to see if anyone suspicious was outside, if anyone followed him. God, he was turning into one of those paranoid people he hated having to deal with. Still, he had work to do.

He shut the windows and got the papers out, spreading them across the bed. He remembered what Joyce had said, before he got the call about the Body. She'd said that she was missing something, that she was looking for something she couldn't put her finger on. If he could find that...

What did he know? The lab ran MKUltra experiments until the early

seventies. They kidnapped kids of their victims, and apparently raised them as experiments, and had something to do with the disappearance of Max, who showed up in his wall and was somewhere cold and dark. And remnants of that place were in the Lab, the last thing he saw before he was drugged.

The first thing that clicked for him was that the Lab had an entrance to wherever Max was. He wondered how she ended up passing through it and not able to return; maybe the Lab grabbed her off the street and sent her through... but why wouldn't they send one of their own men? Because Max was expendable? But why send Max in at all? If they wanted to study the other world, they'd send a scientist, or add a recorder to her. Did they... did they send her in as some kind of cultish sacrifice to whatever Monster she was running from? The Lab seemed much more scientific than that, and if they wanted to keep the Monster fed, it'd be much easier and less alarming to send in a cow or a horse or some kind of large animal. So Max must have ended up there accidentally, but *how*, unless there were other entrances?

And why kidnap children? If Joyce was right, and they were simply continuing their MKUltra experiments, why kidnap an infant who wouldn't be able to adequately respond to experiments for years? Wouldn't it be easier to simply kidnap their earlier victims, instead of just their children? And wouldn't it be dangerous to capture children with one, obvious thing in common- that being their parents' past with the experimentation? If they wanted to continue MKUltra, there were much easier people to abduct.

Unless...

Hopper grabbed one of Joyce's papers, a newspaper article about MKUltra itself. He skimmed it; it said something about them using hypnosis and LSD on their subjects. He wondered what exactly that could do to an unborn child. If they were studying the kids themselves, and not simply using them for drug tests, then that would explain everything.

Except the Other World.

He still needed to figure that out.

## 25. Different Paths

### CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

#### *Different Paths*

Jonathan woke up the next day, with morning light shining into his eyes.

Nancy was already up, and they talked for a while, about the Monster, and what it could be, and what it could *want*.

Once they thought they had an idea, Nancy said, "I'll get El, and then we'll go into town and get supplies. We'll get everything we need to destroy that Monster, and drop El off at her Dad's. We can track the Gate with our compass, get in, kill it, and get out. Hopefully we'll find Max, Barb and your Mom."

Jonathan nodded, staring at the ground. "Um... what're you gonna tell your parents?"

"They won't ask." Nancy shrugged. "Mom'll be too busy with Holly, and if Dad's not at work, he's asleep." She didn't really want to think about that, so said, "I'm gonna go get El. Be right back."

She went down the stairs, managing to silently pass by her Mom, who was once again in the kitchen, this time feeding Holly with a bright smile on her face, a smile that probably wouldn't last very long. Nancy continued to the basement, rushing down and whispering, "Hey, El, time to go."

She froze at the bottom of the stairs, and exasperated sigh escaping her.

El was nowhere to be seen. Her bag was gone, too, and the only difference in the quiet basement that Nancy could see was a note taped to the couch, El's familiar handwriting across it.

"Goddamn it." Nancy sighed.

*He was woken up in the middle of the night.*

*This happened a lot. If it wasn't from the noise of Ten crawling through the vents, it was from Papa, who had a new test for him. He hated those tests.*

*The lights turned on, and he sat up in bed, looking up at Papa, who brought him a bottle of water.*

*"Today is a very special day," he said. "You know why?"*

*He shook his head.*

*"Because today we make history. Today, we make contact."*

Mike was shaken awake. He sat up, his hand already out, only to calm when he saw it was just Lucas.

"Twelve?" Mike asked.

Lucas shook his head. The boys had been taking turns sleeping, the other watching out for Twelve, or the Bad Men, or anyone else.

"Food?" Mike asked again.

"No."

Mike stood up. "I'll get food. Stay here?"

Lucas looked panicked. "Split up?"

"Just wait for me." Mike said, walking forwards. He thought he'd seen a building the other day, and figured it was a place where he could get food.

As he walked, he stopped in front of a river. He paused, looking down at his reflection. He still wore the wig and hat from the day before, though they were both a little crooked, and his clothes were torn. He kneeled down to get a better look at his face. He realized, as

his heart sank, that he didn't look pretty anymore.

He shut his eyes, trying to keep the tears from flowing. He failed. So he simply looked down at himself, and grabbed the hat and wig, pulling them off his head and throwing them into the water. He watched as they floated away, down the water and far away from him.

"El did *what*?"

Nancy groaned, gesturing to the note again. "She left to find the Gate herself. She probably knew we'd make her go home."

"What the hell do we do, then?"

Nancy sighed. "We'll have to hurry it up. Get supplies as fast as we can, get into the woods, and get to the Gate before she can. Do you have a Compass?"

He shook his head.

"Well, we'll have to get that, too. Damn it, if the Chief finds out we let his daughter run off on her own..."

"Hey," Jonathan said, reaching out grabbing her arm; Nancy realized that she'd been shaking a little. "Hey, it's okay. We'll find her."

Nancy took a deep breath. "It's just... if that *Thing* finds her, it will kill her. We *have* to kill it first."

El was in the forest again.

Her feet hurt, but she didn't care. She was following the compass again, now more determined than ever. Nancy had been to the Upside-Down, she'd seen the Demogorgon. The Gate *had* to be nearby. El didn't have a plan, or a real idea of what she was doing. All she knew was that she had to get to that awful place and get Max *out* of there.

However, as she walked farther, she heard a rustle in the bushes.

She stopped, turning around, hope bursting in her chest. "Mike?"

She could definitely see someone in the bushes. She came a little closer, hoping she didn't look threatening. "Lucas?"

She sat in front of the bush; someone was in there, frozen in terror.

El pushed aside the leaves, and stared the boy in the face.

She hadn't seen him before, but she knew instantly he was from the Lab. He had the same hospital gown as the other boys had, though it was hidden by an oversized coat, and he also had the same terrified look in his eyes she'd seen in Mike. "Hello?" she said.

The boy stared at her, his gaze softening a little, and she noticed his nose bleed. *Shit*, she thought, glancing around to see what he'd done. She didn't see anything, but before she could ask, the boy held up his arm, a pleading look in his eyes.

El felt herself stiffen, a realization settling in.

She saw the 012 tattoo. She'd found him.

She didn't know exactly what to say, so she just said, "Hey. I know your friends."

## 26. The Quarry

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

#### *The Quarry*

“Eggos?” Lucas asked as they walked through the woods.

“Cold Eggos.” Mike flinched, after having bitten into one. This wasn’t worth the trip to the store, especially the part where he had to break the door to get them to stop following him. “El makes them warm.”

Lucas snorted.

“What?”

Lucas gave him a glare. “El. Not our friend.”

“Yes, she is.” Mike argued.

“Not one of us.”

“Doesn’t mean she’s not a friend.”

“Yes.”

Mike sighed. “You can’t push. I can’t change light. We’re not the same, but we’re friends.”

“That’s not what I mean.”

“It is!”

They glared at each other, until Lucas sighed. “I... I want Ten and Twelve. Not El.”

Mike reached forwards, grabbing his friend’s arm. “El’s not Ten. El’s not Twelve. She’s El. We’re not leaving Ten and Twelve by being her friend.”

Lucas sighed. "You like El more than us."

"What?" Mike shook his head wildly. "No! No."

"You pushed me," Lucas reminded him, "For her."

Mike stared at him. "I didn't want..."

Before he could say anything else, they heard the scream.

Hopper walked into the Office, hoping nobody noticed that he hadn't slept. "What the hell is it now, Powell?" he asked, giving him a glare.

"The Byers boy, and the Wheeler girl." he said, handing him a file. "Got into a fight."

Hopper paused. "Nancy Wheeler?"

"Yeah. Her boyfriend called her a slut or something, so Byers punched him."

Hopper took the file and walked straight to the back. He saw Jonathan and Nancy sitting alone at a table; Nancy had a cold steak held to a bruise on Jonathan's face, but they both looked up at him as he walked in.

"What happened?" Hopper asked.

Nancy and Jonathan looked at each other. "A fight." Nancy shrugged. "Nothing big."

"Okay," Hopper said, sitting in front of them, "So, how about a new question, where the hell is my daughter?"

Both teenagers stiffened; they both could immediately tell that they were in trouble.

"Chief," Callahan said behind him, "There's something you need to see."

Five minutes later, Hopper slammed a box filled with bear traps,



sharp tools and other weapons, in front of the two teenagers.

“Mind explaining this?” he asked.

“Why were you going through my car?” Jonathan asked, anger rising in his voice.

“Is that really the question you should be asking right now?” Hopper asked. “You two, my office, *now*.”

“You won’t believe us.” Jonathan said.

Hopper gave him a glare. “Try me.”

“I’ve been calling them Mike and Lucas.” El explained to Twelve, who was gripping onto her arm. “I mean, Eleven’s Mike and Nine’s Lucas. I named Mike after a character from *Peter Pan*, and Lucas after his powers. I can name you, too. What do you like?”

Twelve gave her a careful look.

“Right, right. Jonathan said you don’t talk. I’ll think of something.”

They had left the forest a short while ago, and were now on the path. El looked away from Twelve and glanced around. They were at the cliff above the Quarry, a rock wall on their left and the drop off on the right; she smiled, turning to Twelve. “I know where we are! We can get into town, and Jonathan can take you home...”

Twelve shook his head.

“Oh, not your home, his home-”

He shook his head again, looking scared. El sighed. “Listen. I’ll get you somewhere safe, and then I can get the others-”

She stopped, hearing footsteps behind her. She turned, confused, and froze.

“Troy?” she asked, and she felt Twelve jump behind her, grabbing

her arm. "What the hell are you doing here?"

Her eyes fell to Troy's hand. Oh, shit.

Oh *shit*.

He had a *knife*.

She backed up, turning around. *Shit*. James was behind her. She felt Twelve grip her arm and start to whimper. His nose was bleeding again.

"Piss off!" El yelled, giving the boys a glare and stepping towards James. She could probably get past him, he was less of a threat at the moment, and-

Before she could do anything, she felt a hand on her shoulder, pushing her forwards. Troy had pushed her to the ground, and as she fell, she felt Twelve ripped away from her.

At that moment, as she steadied herself and turned around, only to see Troy holding a knife to the boy's throat, Twelve screamed.

His scream was *loud*, that was for sure. Though Troy seemed unfazed, James and El both jumped back, as the boy continued to screech, tears starting to fall down his face, louder than anything El had ever heard.

"Shut up!" Troy yelled, forcing his arm around the boy's throat, keeping him in a headlock. "Who's this, golden girl, your crazy boyfriend?"

"Let him go!" El yelled, panic shaking her body. She didn't know this kid well, but he was a *child*, he was quiet and nice and terrified and he had nothing to do with this. "Let him go, you bastard!"

"Stay back!" Troy yelled, pointing his knife back to Twelve's throat, as the boy stopped screaming and started to cry, "Or I cut him."

"What do you *want*?" El asked, scanning Troy, trying to look for some kind of weak point.

“I want to know how you did it!”

“How I did *what*?”

“I know you did something to me! Some nerdy science shit to make me do that!”

“What? Piss your pants?” El scoffed. “Don’t you do that all the time, shithead?”

“Shut *up*!” Troy yelled, his knife dangerously close to Twelve’s skin. “Shut up, or whoever this kid is, he won’t scream again.”

“He’s got nothing to do with this! Let him *go*!” El yelled, her mind racing, trying to figure out *what* to do, she had to help Twelve, she had to *save* Twelve.

“I’ll let him go, sure.” Troy said, a dangerous smirk growing on his face as he struggled to keep the sobbing Twelve in one place. “But first, I think you can do something for me.”

“What?” El asked, panicking, her eyes focused on the knife and on the crying boy.

“Jump.”

El’s eyes widened, and she turned, looking off the cliff and into the water. She knew, from both basic science and her Dad’s warnings, that that kind of fall wasn’t survivable. She wondered if Troy knew that, or if he cared. She started to shake, her eyes widening at the realization.

“Jump,” Troy continued. “Or we can send this kid off the cliff for you.”

“Troy...” James said behind her, a hint of uncertainty in his voice.

“Leave him *alone*.” El said, frustrated at the fact she was starting to tear up. “*Please*, leave him *alone*.”

“*Jump*!”

El was crying, too, now, backing up towards the edge of the cliff. She didn't want to die. She had to find Max, she had to find Lucas and *Mike*, she had to save the boys... but she had to save Twelve, too.

Turning, she broke into a run, squinting until she reached the end, in which she shut her eyes. Maybe if she didn't look, she wouldn't be able to tell when it would end.

She jumped, feeling the wind press down on her as she fell.

And then she felt herself freeze.

She opened her eyes, realizing that she was levitating mid-air. She breathed hard, and then she was pulled up, flying into the air. She flew over Troy and James, who were standing at the edge of the cliff, looking shocked. She flew by Twelve, who was curled on the ground, staring at her in amazement, and she was dropped to the dirt.

She breathed in, thrown off by how hastily she was tossed onto the ground. She felt hurt, she was still crying, but she was *alive*.

She slowly turned, her eyes drawn by movement to her left. Her eyes went wide, staring in shock and awe.

Mike was there.

He walked towards the kids, a dark look in his eyes, confident and angry, his nose trickling blood. Behind him, Lucas was following, a few feet behind, his arms crossed and a familiar glare on his face. El heard Twelve gasp with relief, heard Troy and James mutter confusion, but it didn't matter. None of it mattered. Mike was *there*. Mike had *saved her*.

Mike kept walking, and with a blink of an eye, James was pushed back, thrown against the road. With a tilt of his head, Troy dropped the knife, screaming, a snap of bones sounding across the Quarry. "He broke my arm!" he screeched. "My arm!"

"Go." was all the boy said, finally stopping just in front of them. The two bullies ran, taking off as fast as they could. Twelve moved first, stepping closer to the boys, a relief in his eyes. Lucas rushed forwards, enveloping his friend in a tight hug, looking ready to cry.

Mike, meanwhile, toppled to the ground.

*He was in the Dark Place again.*

*Papa had put him in the Bath. There had been people there, people to see him. While they were walking there, he saw the Others, sitting in individual chairs outside the room, trying not to look at each other, fear in all their eyes.*

*“The Supervisors are not here for them.” Papa said, as he noticed the boy’s lingering gaze on the others. “They’re here for you, Eleven. Just for you.”*

*So he was put in the Bath, with everyone watching. He was in the Dark Place. He had been sent to find the Beast again, talk to the Monster. He found it easily enough; it was hard to forget. It was eating something as he approached, water dripping from its head. A deep growl emitted from it as the boy approached, trying to keep his emotions at bay. Papa never liked when he showed emotions. He had a feeling the Monster wouldn’t like that either.*

*The boy reached out to touch it, while it wasn’t looking at him. He was so close, his fingers just about to hit it, and he was shaking. This thing seemed wrong, it felt so wrong, but he had to touch it. Papa would be mad if he didn’t.*

*So he touched it, felt the wet slime, and instantly, the thing turned, screeching.*

*He started screaming, too, blinking out of the Mind Place as fast as he could, banging on the dark walls of the Bath, his voice loud, his sobs echoing. He wanted out. They had to let him out!*

*The lights blinked, and the alarm blared, and the wall crumbled. It crumbled, and the Thing burst out.*

“Mike! Mike, are you okay?”

Mike looked up, breathing hard, to see El leaning above him, eyes worried. Lucas and Twelve- *Twelve was here*- were standing behind her, looking concerned. Twelve was grabbing Lucas's arm, tears and blood streaming from his face.

"Mike!"

Mike started to cry, too, his voice breaking. "El... I'm sorry..."

"Sorry? What are you sorry for?" El almost smiled, thinking this was ridiculous. But she would hate him now. She would hate him and he'd never see her smile again.

"The Gate..." Mike sobbed, his voice barely above a whisper now. "I opened it."

It all was rushing back to him; the people dead, being rushed away and back to his room, barely able to throw on his clothes before breaking out, finding the Others, running and running and *running*. He opened it. He let the Monster out. It was his fault that Max was gone, that all this happened. It was *his fault*.

"I'm the Monster."

El shook her head, a real smile breaking out on her face. "No, no! No, Mike, you're not the monster! You saved us, Mike! You saved Twelve, and you saved me! You saved me, Mike!"

She reached down, pulling him into a tight hug. They were both crying, holding each other. He felt more arms; Twelve had joined in. Lucas came in, too, and all four of them were hugging, they were together, they were *alive*.

"They have my Mom?"

Hopper looked at the poor teenager, who had an expression that was a perfect mix of anger and sadness. "And," he continued, "They have my brother?"

Hopper nodded. "And you're telling me that you know what took

Max?”

“The Monster.” Nancy nodded.

“And my daughter is *alone* in the woods, looking for this thing?”

Nancy flinched and said defensively, “It wasn’t *our* idea.”

“You have a very determined daughter.” Jonathan added quietly.

Hopper sighed. “Yeah, she is. I’m just...” he sighed. “Is there a way we can find her before she gets to that thing? Cause she may *think* she can kill that beast with her bare hands, but she’s still a twelve year old facing down some kind of murder-alien thing.”

Nancy looked up, remembering something important. “Actually, we *can* find her. Do you have a compass?”

## 27. The Bad Men are Coming

### CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

#### *The Bad Men are Coming*

“Take a left here.”

“There’s no left turn for a while.”

“Take a left, Chief!”

Nancy sat in the shotgun seat, holding the compass out in front of her. Jonathan was in the back, with a walkie-talkie that kept sputtering and buzzing. El wasn’t on the channel, apparently, but it wasn’t like they were going to stop trying to contact her.

Hopper drove the car to the left, as Nancy kept staring at the Compass, looking close for any kind of change in the needle’s direction. She heard the Chief say, “I hope to God this isn’t leading where I think it is,” and she looked up slightly.

“Where do you...”

“For the love of-” Hopper cut himself off as he glanced towards her, his eyes falling on the compass, which was swiveling to the right. “Goddamn it.”

“El?” Jonathan called, still on the Walkie-Talkie. When he got no response, he said, “Are you sure this is the right channel?”

“El is on the same channel at all times.” Nancy said.

Hopper stopped the car suddenly, causing Nancy to jerk forwards. “Wh-what?” she asked. “What happened?”

“Shit.” Hopper said, shaking his head and pointing forwards. “Shit.”

They all looked ahead, seeing that several feet ahead was Hawkins



Lab.

Nancy shook a little, staring up at the place. She hadn't actually seen it up close before. It was a lot bigger than she'd imagined, and something definitely seemed *off* about it. She gave Hopper a quick, panicked look. "Is... is that..."

"So," Jonathan said, leaning forwards to get closer to the others. "That place has got my Mom, my brother, a portal to another world, *and* possibly your daughter?"

"Goddamn it." Hopper swore, staring up at the sky. "Goddamn it."

"Uh, Chief?" Nancy asked, staring out the window. "Where are those vans going?"

They all looked towards the building; the gate was opening, and four vans were driving past.

"They're gonna see us." was what Jonathan said first.

Nancy turned to Hopper. "Chief, we've gotta get out of here."

"Or we could try and break in now." Jonathan suggested. "There's a lot of people leaving."

"What, you think they're sending all their security out? They're not idiots." Nancy snapped, turning around towards him.

"They have my *Mom*." Jonathan said, giving her a glare back.

"Hey, hey!" Hopper said, raising his hands. "Time out. We're leaving, but we *will* be coming back. We're not leaving Joyce in that hellhole, but it won't do her any good if we get captured."

He started the car again while Jonathan and Nancy settled down, but still kept talking. "It doesn't make sense." he muttered under his breath. "Why would they send so many people out of the Lab?"

Suddenly, something hit Nancy. She turned to him, eyes wide. "J-Jonathan, keep trying to get to El."

“What? What’s wrong?” Jonathan asked.

Nancy took a breath, remembering that they hadn’t quite told Hopper... well, she’d have to catch him up later. “I think they found the boys.”

El knocked on the bathroom door. “Hey, kid, you done in there?”

She didn’t get a response- of course- so she simply continued, “Once you wash your hands and everything, I’ve got an Eggo sandwich for you. How long’s it been since you’ve had food?”

She turned around, sitting against the wall and looking ahead. Mike was sitting across from her, curled up eating his own Eggos. Lucas was next to him, staring up at the ceiling. “You okay?” El asked, fiddling with the strap of her bag.

Lucas shook his head. “No Ten.”

“We’ll find him.” El said, leaning forwards and grabbing his hand, smiling. “Don’t worry. We got three outta the four of you, chances are Ten will show up soon.”

“He’ll find us.” Mike said, looking over at the two of them.

Lucas sighed, staring down at the floor. El continued, “Listen. I know you don’t really like me that much. I’m used to it, a lotta people don’t like me. But I’m here to help, okay? I’m gonna try to keep you safe.”

Lucas looked up at her, biting his lip. He looked like he wanted to say something, but he didn’t. El was fine with that, she just smiled at him until the bathroom door opened, and Twelve peeked out, looking sheepish. He pointed inside, and El stood up, following him until she saw the issue; the sink was still on, water trickling out.

“Couldn’t get the handle to move back?” El asked, reaching forwards and hitting the sink a little. “It’s okay, happens all the time.”

As she turned the faucet off, she turned a little to see Mike enter, giving Twelve a quick hug; the three boys had been very affectionate

with each other once he'd arrived, almost completely inseparable. However, after pulling away, Mike moved closer to the sink, looking at the mirror hanging on the wall, his face falling slightly at his messy appearance. El looked over at him, studying him as he looked at his reflection.

"Still pretty?" Mike asked.

El felt her heart skip a beat as she almost instinctively said, "Yeah. Yeah, you look really... really good, really pretty."

Mike's face lit up again as he smiled at her, and reached out to grab her hand. El froze for a second, as she gripped his palm and smiled a little. After a second, though, she cleared her throat and giggled awkwardly, before turning to Twelve, who looked bewildered by what was going on.

"Now," El said, turning to Twelve, who was standing in the doorway. "We can go up to the attic, and we can get you some actual clothes. How long have you been in that hospital gown? It's gotta be filthy."

Before she could continue, however, Lucas pushed the door open, also walking into the now pretty crowded bathroom, holding El's bag out to her. It was buzzing, and she heard a muffled voice from inside. She grabbed it, pulling out her walkie-talkie and answering. "El Hopper here."

"El, oh my God!" came Jonathan's voice; it was buzzing in and out. "El... coming... vans..."

"I can't hear you, Jonathan." El said. "Why are you even on this channel?"

She heard what sounded like a scuffle, and then heard Nancy's loud shout. "El Hopper, you listen... now! ... out! Get *out*-!"

"What the hell..." El fiddled with the communicator for a second. "Can you..."

"El!"

El froze, answering quickly. "Dad? Dad, why are you with Nancy and

Jonathan?”

“El, the Lab’s coming. They’re coming for... in vans... get out!”

The girl’s eyes widened, and she called back, “I’m going! I’m going!” before shoving her walkie-talkie back in her bag and turning the boys, who looked just as terrified as she felt; Twelve had grabbed onto Lucas’s arm so tight his knuckles turned white, as he pressed against his friend and whimpered, and Mike had come closer to El, eyes wide and panicked.

“We have to go!” El said.

“How?” Mike asked, panicked.

El tried to think. She only had one bike, and it wasn’t as if all four of them could fit on the seat. There was no way they could outrun vans, or...

“I have an idea,” El said, “But it’s a bad one.”

The boys looked at each other. “Okay.” Mike said first, shrugging.

“When Max comes back from the dead,” El hissed, “Dad’s gonna kill her.”

She supposed she’d be dead, first. After all, it was her idea to have Mike use his powers to unlock a car they found parked on the street, and to put herself behind the wheel. Max’s Dad had taught his daughter a little driving when she was visiting him in California last, and Max had shown El while her Dad was investigating a case and the two were allowed to wait in the parking lot for an hour or so. Honestly, El was surprised he hadn’t seen that coming.

“Okay, so, this is the shift.” El said, “And this is the brake...”

“Just go!” Lucas said from the backseat.

“I’m reminding myself!” El rolled her eyes. “And get your seatbelts on.”

“Seat... belts?” Mike asked.

El sighed and showed them how to put it on. Twelve got it first, but it took Mike and Lucas a few tries; however, unfortunately, Mike figured out quite quickly how to open and close the window, and he thought pressing the button was the most fun thing on the planet. She sighed and lifted the seat a little, barely able to see the windshield. “Good God, we’re gonna die.”

“You’ll be good.” Mike smiled at her.

El sighed. “Okay, so I think I can reach the pedals...”

“Go!” Lucas rolled his eyes.

“Fine!” El yelled, shifting into drive and hitting the gas.

Cars were a *lot* faster than she remembered.

Lucas let out a little screech as the car picked up speed, and El wondered how many times the boys had *been* in a car before. She glanced out the mirrors from time to time, struggling to remember all the things that Max had bothered to tell her before driving her around the Parking Lot several months before. She kept most of her focus on going as fast as she dared, swerving between streets. She had a vague idea of where she was going, but she had to make sure that she didn’t run into the Lab.

She turned a corner, and saw two vans labelled *Hawkins Power & Light*, parked on the street.

“*Shit.*” El screamed, and hit the gas pedal *hard*.

They passed the vans, but El could hear the cars starting. They’d been spotted, definitely, and they were about to get into a chase. She was focused on the road, so she didn’t see Mike roll down his window and look out, staring back at a man outside the van with white hair and hard eyes. She didn’t see Mike stare back at him, in shock, sadness and fear, and she didn’t see him sit back in his seat, turning his head towards the back to look at his friends, who were holding hands and watching him, the same expression reflected on their faces.

El glanced out the rearview mirror after turning the corner, cursing some more when she saw the two vans following. “Shit, shit, shit!” she said, pressing more on the gas pedal, knowing that she was 100% breaking the speed limit, and not caring.

“Go, go!” Lucas yelled.

“I’m *working on it!*” El shouted, before letting out a scream of a word she knew her Dad wouldn’t want her saying, as she turned too fast and the car almost sped right off the street.

They passed another street, and when El looked back again, there were three vans following, not two.

“I don’t know how to drive,” El said, talking as fast as she could to keep herself from breaking down, “I shouldn’t be in a car chase.”

“Lucas, light?” Mike asked, turning around slightly.

Lucas shook his head, still gripping onto Twelve’s hand as the other boy tried to curl up in his seat. “Too fast...”

“Okay, okay, I think we’re in the clear, if I can just...” El said, turning another corner.

She was finally on the street out of town, where she wanted to go, when she let out another curse as another van appeared in front of her, cutting her off.

“I can’t stop!” El said, looking down at the speedometer. “If I swerve, we crash, if I stop, the car won’t stop fast enough, *we’re gonna crash!*”

“Crash?” Lucas yelled, as Twelve let out a whimper.

Mike didn’t yell. He seemed eerily calm, as he sat back in his seat and shut his eyes. El barely noticed this, focusing on the fact that this was the second time she was about to die today and she really wished she’d just walked Max home that night, goddamn it.

Suddenly, the van in front of them lifted off the ground.

They all stared in shock as the van went over the windshield, barely

missing the car. They didn't see it land, but they heard and *felt* the crash. El swore again- a good round of *Shits*- but burst into a relieved smile as she glanced into the rearview mirror, seeing the other vans manage to stop behind the crashed car, unable to follow them farther.

She glanced towards Mike to see him wipe his nose on his sleeve. He turned to look out his window, his head sticking out a little. After a second, he pulled back and turned to El, a small smile on his face, and then he shrugged and sat back, very satisfied with himself.

"El..." Lucas said quietly from the backseat.

"Yeah?"

"I don't like cars."

## 28. Getting Together

### CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

#### *Getting Together*

The kids were in the old Junkyard, sitting in the backseat of a stolen car, with no idea what to do.

“Okay, so I think we should contact my Dad.” El said.

Twelve shook his head, looking scared.

“Don’t worry, he’s... he’s not like your Dad, he’s great.” El smiled a little.

Twelve continued to shake his head, and El sighed. “Listen, I’m sorry, I don’t know what’s up with you.”

Mike sat up suddenly, a new idea. “Twelve, the tapping code!”

“What?” El asked.

Mike turned to her. “One man taught Twelve a code! Dots and Dashes.”

“Dots and...” El turned to Twelve. “You know Morse Code?”

Twelve considered, before reaching to the sideboard, tapping out a pattern. “Wait!” El said, reaching into her bag and pulling out an old book and an almost-broken pencil. She nodded at him, and he started tapping again.

- ● ● ● - - ● - - ● ● ● - ●

El glanced down at the dots, deciphering in her head. She turned back to him and said, “Listen, my Dad can deal with a little danger. He’s a cop, and he’s really good at it.”



Twelve shook his head.

- ● ● ● ● - - ● ● - - ● - ●

El sighed. "Listen, my Dad can help. He really can."

The boys looked to each other, all having some kind of disbelief in their eyes. She realized that none of them had probably had trusted authority figures before... did they?

"Did..." El considered. "Were you guys born in the Lab?" When they seemed confused, she rephrased. "Before this week, were you guys ever outside?"

Mike and Twelve shook their heads, but Lucas paused. "Lucas?"

Lucas hesitated, before saying, "I... I don't remember much. But... I think I remember pretty toys, and a nice place, and a nice song." He hummed a few notes, before stopping and shaking his head. "But that's all. Ten remembers more."

Twelve looked at the other boys, and tapped slowly,

- ● - ●

The boys shook their heads. "Don't know." Mike said.

They were all quiet for a little, and El decided to ask, "So, Twelve, what are your powers again? The boys said you see stuff."

Twelve considered.

● ● ● ● ● ● - ● ● ● ● ● - - ● ● ● ● ● -

"See light?" El repeated, after writing down the taps. "What kind of light?"

"People's light." Mike responded, looking up at his friend. "And other things. He could see the... the Monster, when none of us could. But mostly light. He can see the light around people, whether it's good or bad."

El glanced up at Twelve, laughing nervously. “So, uh, what do I look like?”

Twelve considered, trying to figure out how to word it. Finally, he tapped,

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“What does that mean?” El asked.

The boys seemed to understand this. Lucas glanced at his feet, and Mike smiled brightly, reaching out and grabbing El’s hand. “Good.” he explained, smiling at her.

She blushed, glancing down at Mike’s hand on hers, but before she could respond, she heard a buzz from her bag. “El?”

She picked it up, pulling a little away from Mike, and grabbing the walkie-talkie. “Dad!”

The boys all flinched, but El listened carefully. “El, we need to know where you are. We’re coming to find you, where are you?”

El glanced up at the boys. Lucas looked standoffish, glaring down at the communicator as if he could set it on fire. Twelve looked nervous, and had some sort of sad gaze in his eyes as he looked at El. But Mike simply reached out and touched her hand again, a small smile on his face. “Trust.” he said. “We trust you.”

El looked at all the boys. They did trust her. Even Lucas gave her a quick look, and a small nod.

“El?”

El sighed and hit the Walkie-Talkie. “Junkyard. We stole a car. Don’t kill us.”

Hopper put his walkie-talkie away, turning to the two teens. They had parked their car outside the General Store, and were standing outside, leaning against the doors. “What are we gonna do?” Nancy

asked.

“Go get the kids.” Hopper shrugged. “Before someone else can.”

“You haven’t got enough room.” Nancy said, gesturing to the car. “You can fit three kids in the backseat, and El said there were four of them, and there’s three of us.”

Before Hopper could say anything, Jonathan volunteered, “We can meet you somewhere else.”

“Where?”

“My house.” Jonathan suggested. “Nobody will be there, we can figure out what to do.”

“Don’t get kidnapped.” was Hopper’s nice farewell as he started to get back in the car.

“Good luck.” Nancy said.

“Remember, Twelve’s really shy.” Jonathan threw out. “He won’t talk to you.”

“And Mike and Lucas will kill you if they think you’re a threat.” Nancy added.

Hopper gave them a nod and drove off. The teenagers turned to each other.

“He cares about us.” Nancy explained. “That’s his way of showing it, I think.”

Jonathan sighed and glanced at the ground. Nancy raised an eyebrow. “Okay, what’s up?”

“W-well... It’s about Will.”

Nancy paused, before asking, “He’s... you said he was your brother?”

Jonathan nodded. “He, uh... I don’t remember, really, I was only, like, four, but from what I got, Mom lost him right after she gave

birth, but she didn't believe he was really... she thought he got kidnapped and I kinda stopped believing her by the time I turned twelve. But..." he sighed. "Well, now it turns out that the Lab has my brother. And... well, we know the kids that were in there."

"You think..." Nancy looked at him carefully. "You think one of them is your brother?"

Jonathan sighed. "It's... I mean, yes. Yeah, I do." He looked down at her. "And... Nancy, I think it's Twelve."

"You do?"

"I think... you said that they said he sees hidden things. If he somehow figured out we were brothers, that would... well, it would explain some stuff. And the more I think about it, the more I realize that he looks like me and my Mom..."

"Oh, oh my God..." Nancy said. "Jonathan, that's gotta be..."

"Weird?"

"I..." Nancy shrugged. "That's a good way to put it."

He sighed. "Honestly, I'm less weirded out and more mad at myself for keeping my long-lost brother in my freaking clubhouse instead of bringing him to my Mom."

Nancy laughed a little, and Jonathan smiled at her. "Yeah, that is pretty nuts."

They looked up as a car drove by, tensing in case they had to run. However, they both immediately turned their trepidation into confusion. "Is..." Nancy asked, looking at Jonathan. "Is that *Steve's* car?"

"You're the one who'd know." Jonathan said, following the car with his eyes.

After a second, the car turned around; apparently the driver had spotted them. It parked just a little bit away from them, and, lo and behold, Steve got out. His face was still bloody, and Nancy

remembered, *Oh, yeah, Jonathan and him kinda fought a couple hours ago.*

Jonathan tensed again beside her as Steve ran up. "Nancy!" he called, and he slowed once he registered that Jonathan was there, too. "Uh..."

They looked at each other for a while, and then Steve said, "Um... I'm really, really sorry for being an asshole."

Nancy and Jonathan simply continued staring, and he said. "Look, I know that I've been a shithead the last couple days, and what I did today was really, really messed up, and you don't have to forgive me, I just... I need to show you something."

Nancy glanced to Jonathan, before turning back to Steve. "What are you talking about?"

"It's, uh, kinda the reason I've been weird lately." Steve admitted. "I mean, not why I've been an asshole, I don't think, but... it's in my car."

"Steve..." Nancy said, a warning raising in her voice.

"Listen, just... just don't freak out." Steve said.

Nancy raised an eyebrow, and looked at Jonathan. Jonathan spoke first. "Okay. But if you try anything, Harrington, I swear to God..."

"You'll kill me?" Steve asked. "Yeah, yeah, I believe you, but I also believe that Nancy would get to me first."

"Yeah, I would." Nancy said. "Just, show us what's up, and then we've got somewhere to be."

Something flashed in Steve's eyes- some kind of hurt- but he shrugged it off. "Okay, just... he's in the car, yeah."

He walked back to his car, going around to the other side and opening the door. He seemed to be reaching in for something; as he did, Jonathan and Nancy crept closer, sharing a look. If Steve was trying to pull something on them...

Steve moved around the car, taking a deep breath. “Okay, uh, here we go.”

He reached out his hand, and revealed what he’d been hiding.

Jonathan let out a gasp and stumbled backwards a little. Nancy, however, reacted by widening her eyes, her mouth opening and closing, no sound emerging. She was in complete shock; what the *hell*? Steve glanced at them, then back down.

Next to him was a small boy, maybe twelve years old, wearing Steve’s childhood clothes and a baseball cap, with a very visible *010* tattoo on his wrist.

“This is Dustin.” Steve said, gesturing down at him. “I mean, uh, I’ve been calling him that. His name’s actually *Ten*, but when I asked him if that was all, he said it was ‘*Just Ten*’, and for some reason I thought he said *Dustin*, and I like that better because Ten is a shitty name.”

“Shitty.” Dustin nodded, looking very serious.

“Hey, hey!” Steve looked down at him. “What did we say about swearing?”

“You didn’t say anything about swearing.” Dustin said, rolling his eyes.

“Okay, that’s fair. So, uh, he’s kinda been hiding from Law enforcement, so I couldn’t tell you, he showed up right after the party, I... are you guys okay?”

Both teenagers were still staring in complete shock at the kid. Dustin looked a little nervous, glancing up at Steve. “Who are they?”

“That’s Jonathan Byers.” Steve introduced, pointing to the teen. “And *that’s* Nancy Wheeler.”

Dustin’s eyes widened. “*The* Nancy?”

“Yeah, shut up.” Steve looked back at them. “Seriously, guys, are you gonna throw up or something? Look, it turns out I’m not that bad a-”

“*Ten!*” was what Nancy finally said.

Steve and Dustin both froze, and Steve looked down at the kid. “Do you, uh, know her?”

Dustin shook his head. “Haven’t seen her.”

Nancy started running forwards, kneeling in front of Dustin, looking down at his tattoo. Yes, it was there, it was real, holy *shit*. “Ten-Dustin- I know your friends!”

Dustin stared at her in shock, his mouth dropping, and then he started beaming. “You do? You know where they are? Are they safe? Are they okay? Are-”

He reached out, grabbing Nancy’s hand, and suddenly froze.

It wasn’t a panicked freeze, like El would do when she was scared or surprised. He seemed to *literally* freeze, his entire body stopping any movement, barely even breathing.

“Dustin?” Nancy asked, as Jonathan finally ran up behind her. “Dustin, are you-”

“Whoa, whoa, don’t touch him!” Steve said, reaching out and pushing her a little farther away. “He’s having one of his visions, you don’t wanna bother him, it’ll mess with him.”

“Steve...” Nancy said, looking up at him, and then to Dustin. The only sign of movement on the boy was a trickle of blood running from his nose. “What the *hell* have you been up to?”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

lol Are you all happy now?

## 29. Dustin

### Notes for the Chapter:

WOW okay you all WERE really excited for Dustin. Well, I hope you still like him, because this chapter is exclusively Dustin and Steve backstory. Have fun! :D

### CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

*Dustin*

*Three Days Ago*

Steve had just arrived back from school to an empty house- of course, both his parents were too busy to be home- and saw something in the woods out of the corner of his eye.

He turned, wondering if maybe it was Nancy's friend who'd skipped class that day. However, he could see the flash of what looked like a white dress vanishing up a tree trunk. He didn't think that was in Barb's style, was it?

He approached, saying carefully, "Hello?"

He got close enough to the trees to look up, and saw a pair of eyes peering down from the leaves. Much too small for Nancy's friend. "Hey, are you okay?" he asked. "Look, I'm not gonna hurt you... unless you try to hurt me, in which case... Well, I can call the cops."

The figure stared for a second, before slowly descending. Steve stared, bewilderment written on his face, as a twelve-year-old boy jumped down from the tree, clothed only in a hospital gown, and with short-cut, curly brown hair. He looked up at Steve, and started speaking with a slight lisp; some of his teeth were missing. "Who are you?"



Steve paused, looking down at the kid. “Uuuuuuuuhhhhhh...”

“You don’t talk much? That’s okay, the others don’t talk, either.”

“Who... who are you?” Steve asked.

“My name’s Ten.” the kid said, flinching a little as he said his own name, something that really tipped Steve off that something was *wrong*.

“Ten?” Steve finally managed to say. “That’s it?”

“It’s just Ten.” he said.

“Dustin?” Steve asked, mishearing. “Ten’s a weird nickname, but okay. I’m Steve. Where’d you come from, and why are you in the woods behind my house?”

“Well...” he rubbed the back of his head. “I’m hiding. From Papa and the Bad People.”

*Oh*. He could sympathise with that, really. He’d wanted to run away for years. However, he was a little worried about the hospital gown. Had he run away from the hospital after some kind of abuse, or did he break out of a mental institution? Did they even put kids in those places?

The kid held out his hand, for a handshake, and Steve looked down, spotting the tattoo on his wrist- *010*. It took him a second to register. *Just Ten*. he thought again. *Oh*.

“Just Ten, huh?” he said. “Can I call you Dustin instead?”

The kid smiled widely, and nodded. “I like Dustin better.”

Steve smiled a little- this kid was kinda cute, honestly- and shook his hand.

Something happened the second their hands touched. Dustin froze, completely shutting down. He stared ahead, not blinking, and Steve could only barely see him breathe.

“Kid?” Steve asked, panicking. “Kid! Dustin!”

He kneeled down, grabbing the kid’s shoulders and shaking him a little. “Kid, what happened?”

Dustin’s eyes widened, and he started to scream. It was loud, it was scary, and it would definitely attract a lot of unwanted attention. Steve did the first thing he thought of- he picked up the kid and carried him into the house.

He kept screaming even as Steve put him on the couch, running off to find something to help. He didn’t know where his Mom kept the meds- or which ones he’d give to him anyway- or what he should do, really. He considered calling the Hospital, but if the kid ran away, he didn’t want to turn him in just like that. He did the best he could think of in his panic, and grabbed a towel, shoving it under the cold water faucet, and then running back to the kid.

Dustin had stopped screaming so loud, instead whimpering on the couch, bleeding out of his nose. Steve jumped when he saw that, reaching to the side to grab a tissue box, but by the time he’d approached close enough to touch the kid, Dustin shocked him by instantly sitting up, breathing heavily and looking panicked. He turned back to Steve, calming slightly when he recognized him, and asked, “Where am I?”

Steve blinked at him. “My house. We’re alone for at least a few hours... Kid, what the hell happened?”

“Hell?” Dustin repeated, confusion in his eyes. “What is ‘hell’?”

Okay, Steve *knew* a lot of families weren’t religious, but how in the *world* had a twelve-year-old never come across the word *hell*? “It’s, uh, a bad place.” Steve explained. “Where there’s pain and suffering forever or some shit and that’s not *important* right now! What happened to you?”

Dustin glanced at his feet. “I had a vision.”

“A *what*?”

“It’s...” Dustin considered. “I... I sometimes see things, things that

are going to happen.”

“The future?” Steve raised an eyebrow, not noticing that he’d dropped the towel.

Dustin considered. “Yeah, I think Papa used that word.”

“Papa? Your Dad?” Steve asked, coming closer and sitting next to the boy on the couch, handing him the tissue. The boy looked at it curiously, but took it in his hand.

“Papa.” Dustin nodded, moving to wipe his bloody nose on his sleeve.

“No, no, that’s what that’s for.” Steve said, grabbing his arm and gesturing to the tissue he’d given him.

“Oh!” Dustin said, wiping his nose off on the paper. “Sorry, I’ve never seen one of these.”

“A *tissue*?” Steve asked. “Where have you been living?”

Dustin considered, staring into space. He took a shaky breath, and then said, “Hell.”

Steve flinched, watching the boy carefully. It took him a minute to turn back to Steve and say, “I saw you.”

“What?”

“In my vision.” Dustin said. “I think. I think you’re gonna help me.”

“Oh?” Steve asked. He was *already* helping this kid, what more did he want?

Dustin nodded. “I, uh, I have three... three others.”

“Others?”

“Other boys.” Dustin explained. “Like me, kinda.”

“So there are four future-seeing boys running around?”

Dustin shook his head. “They don’t see the future. But they’re other

numbers. Nine, Eleven, Twelve. Nine can change light, Eleven can push things without hands, Twelve sees hidden things.”

“Oh, so you’re the X-Men.” Steve sighed. “Oh, God, I’ve dragged an X-Man into my house. I’m gonna *die*...”

“X-Man?” Dustin asked.

Steve sighed. “Just... where did the other kids go?”

Dustin shook his head. “Eleven went to find food, and the Bad People found us. We had to split up, I don’t know...”

He trailed off, and wiped his sleeve across his eyes. “Hey, hey.” Steve said, reaching and putting an arm around him- what the *hell* was he doing? “It’s alright, kiddo. We’ll find your friends.”

Dustin looked confused again. “Friend?”

Goddamn it, how did this kid not know simple words? “Well, a friend is... it’s someone who likes hanging out with you, and is gonna always help you and you help them, and you just like being together.”

Dustin smiled a little. “Friends... yeah, they’re my friends. I was hoping that I’d *see* them, but I can’t control when I have visions.”

Steve wasn’t entirely sure how his brain wasn’t exploding right now. Apparently there were *four superpowered children* running around, having escaped from some shitty home life, in a hospital gown...

Oh.

Oh.

“Were you in a Lab?” Steve asked.

Dustin scrunched up his face, concentrating. “Yeah, I think that’s what Papa said. ‘Hawkins Lab, your new home.’”

The way he phrased the words sounded different, almost like was imitating someone; he was definitely repeating something he’d heard.

Steve had heard of Hawkins Lab before; he knew it was just outside of town, barely considered a long drive, and that nobody really talked about what they did there. Apparently this was why.

“So, did the Lab... did the Lab give you powers?”

Dustin shook his head. “I’ve always seen things. Even before Papa took me.”

“*Took* you?”

Dustin flinched; Steve had a feeling he wasn’t supposed to say that. “Well, he... he told me that I was gonna help him, that Mommy agreed, that I was gonna do good, I don’t really know, it was a real long time ago...”

“How long?”

Dustin thought. “I don’t know, Papa says time isn’t important. I was... I think it was a birthday when Papa told me to come with him. There were five candles. I don’t remember much else.”

“Jesus...” Steve said, staring ahead. “And I was gonna call the hospital...”

“Are...” Dustin paused, looking sadly at him. “Are you gonna call Papa? And the Bad People?”

Steve saw the quiet fear in this kid’s eyes; he thought he was gonna bring him *back* to the gates of hell, and from the looks of it, wasn’t gonna fight him. Did he somehow think that was *normal*? Well, he supposed he probably did, if he’d been living there for the past seven-or-so years.

“No,” he said, with a firm certainty. “No, I’m not calling anyone. Listen to me, kiddo, you are *never* going back there.”

Dustin looked confused for a second, as if he hadn’t even considered that. He finally let himself smile a little; not as much as before, but he looked so *relieved*. He reached forwards and hugged Steve; the surprised teenager stiffened a little before awkwardly patting him on the back.

Goddamn it, he'd somehow become a babysitter.

He set up a pile of blankets and several pillows in the corner of his room, hidden quite well behind a dresser. He knocked on the bathroom door, where Dustin was cleaning up and changing into some of Steve's old clothes that he dug out in the basement. "Hey, kid, you almost done?"

The door opened, and Dustin looked up at him, the biggest smile on his face. "Your towels are *pretty*!"

The kid had managed to put on Steve's clothes by himself, though his jacket was inside-out. Steve nodded down at him. "Yeah, I guess. Listen, my parents are *probably* gonna be back in, like, a half hour, so you're gonna have to hide with me."

"Hide?" Dustin asked.

"Yeah, my parents are assholes, and you don't want to talk to them, they won't listen to you." Steve said. "They never go in my room, though, so if you just stay in the corner they won't bother you."

Dustin nodded, looking a little sad, and reached out to grab Steve's hand. Steve gave him a confused look and simply gestured for him to follow, walking down the hall and glancing back on occasion to make sure the kid was actually moving. He slowly opened his door, walking in and turning around. "I know it's not that cool, but—"

Dustin stepped in, his eyes widening in surprise and his face lighting up. "It's so *big*!" he said excitedly. "You have such a big room! It's so *pretty*! You have a *window*!"

Steve laughed nervously, trying to remind himself that this kid was raised in a *Lab* and probably never even had more than one outfit, let alone a big room. "Yeah, I guess it's kinda cool. I've got some extra blankets and pillows over there, if you need a cot or something I think I can check in the—"

"No, this is good." Dustin said, running over to the corner and jumping onto the pillows, giggling as the blanket bounced up a little.

“Way better than my old bed!”

Steve sighed, glancing out the window, before moving forwards and shutting the curtains. He turned back to Dustin, about to say, “Listen, kid, we should talk about...” but stopped when he saw that the kid had already fallen asleep. He sighed and ran his hand through his hair as he turned away. So, it looked like he was going to be raising a kid now. Friggin wonderful.

Dustin woke up early the next day, and woke Steve up by accidentally pulling a drawer out of the dresser and crashing it to the ground. Steve then had to explain to him that if he didn’t want to get caught, he shouldn’t make so much noise, and then had to explain that he was going to be gone for eight hours to get to school- and what eight hours was, pointing to the clock and telling him what time he’d be done.

The poor kid looked panicked at that. “What am I gonna do for eight hours?” he asked. “I could go into the woods and...”

“No, no, you’re staying here.” Steve said. “You don’t wanna get caught... look, I have some old books in the basement if you want them...”

“Books?”

*Goddamn.* “You know... words, collected into stories, written down.”

“Stories?” Dustin’s eyes widened.

He seemed really excited about that, so Steve gave him some books, and joked that he shouldn’t tell Tommy and Carol that he had books in his house. “Don’t want them to think I’m a smartass.”

“Tommy and Carol?” Dustin asked, digging through the box with a look of wonder on his face.

“My friends.”

“Do you have other friends?”

Steve considered. "W-well, there's Nancy, but she's a special friend."

"Special friend?"

Honestly, Steve could talk about how amazing Nancy was the whole day, but he didn't have that much time before school. "I'll tell you about her when I get back."

Dustin looked up at him, after grabbing a couple books and hugging them to himself. "If you see the others..."

"Yeah, what do they look like?" Steve asked. "They all running around in hospital gowns, too?"

"Probably." Dustin said. "Well, Nine has darker skin than us and he's got pretty short hair, he doesn't like people much, I think Papa said he's tried to escape before. You're gonna have to tell him you know me or he'll probably try to run away. Eleven's got *really* short hair, they had to cut it all off so they could tell what he was thinking, but he's pretty nice. Twelve's got hair kinda like mine, except not curly. He doesn't talk. Eleven and Nine don't talk as much as me, either."

"You're just special, then?" Steve asked.

Dustin glanced at the ground. "Well, uh, Papa needed me to be able to... to tell him what I saw *exactly*. The others didn't need to learn how to talk much, really, so I'm the only one who... who really knows a lot of words."

Steve took a deep breath; goddamn, this kid needed to get as far away from that Lab as possible. "Okay, I, uh, gotta get to school. I'll see you soon, okay?"

He looked a little worried again, so Steve carefully said, "Don't worry, kid. Nothing's gonna happen to you while I'm around."

Dustin smiled, a look of complete trust in his eyes. "Thank you."

Steve had no idea how he was supposed to take care of a kid- he could barely take care of himself- but he wasn't going to let him go back to the Lab. He was gonna help him escape if it was the last thing he did.



## 30. Back to School

### Notes for the Chapter:

Okay, so I'm posting this chapter a bit early today bc I have Music Lessons on Saturday at the normal update time. So, yeah, that's a thing, thank you all for the lovely comments! :D

### CHAPTER THIRTY

#### *Back to School*

Dustin woke up quickly. He started breathing normally, wiping his nosebleed away on his sleeve, as he heard the teenagers talking.

"And, uh, I hid him in the car when the cops came, and then he went back to my place." Steve was saying, not looking either of the other two in the eye, "After our fight today I kinda ditched Tommy and Carol, cause they're assholes, and I picked him up because I figured you should at least *know*- Dustin!"

He spotted the boy moving, and knelt in front of him, looking at him with concern. "You okay?"

Dustin nodded, before looking back up at Jonathan and Nancy. Jonathan looked nervous, keeping his hands in his pockets and not looking him in the eye. Nancy, meanwhile, had her arms crossed, staring down at the kid. "Did... did you see something?" Nancy asked.

"Yeah, that happens sometimes." Dustin shrugged. "When I touch something important, or when I focus enough."

"What'd you see?" she asked, kneeling down next to Steve.

Dustin shut his eyes, trying to think back. His visions were normally only flashes, and it was hard to keep them in his memory. "I... I saw you, you and Eleven... I think? And there... we need to go

someplace.”

“Where?” Nancy asked.

The boy considered. “There were... there were white floors, and some blue? And a big cat drawing. On the wall. A really big cat.”

It took the teenagers about a minute to figure out, glancing between each other until Nancy slapped her forehead. “Oh, oh goddamn it.” She sighed, and turned to Jonathan. “Jonathan, get the walkie-talkie. We need to tell Hopper that there’s been a change of plans.”

“What?” he asked.

Nancy sighed. “We’re going back to Middle School.”

“How much longer?” Lucas asked, staring out the window.

“I don’t *know*!” El groaned, throwing up her arms. They were all still sitting in the back of the car, with Mike and El on the floor and the other two on the seats. “I don’t know how long it’ll take my Dad to get here, but he will!”

“Promise?” Mike asked.

El sighed. “Yeah, I promise, he’ll find us before-”

“Shit!” Lucas yelled, pointing out the window and repeating a word he’d learned from El.

El jumped up, almost hitting her head on the roof of the car, to look out the window. Mike did, too, and she had to peer around him to get a good view, almost hitting Twelve, who crawled over to Lucas and ducked under his arm.

Outside, a green car pulled up into the junkyard. Another identical car came in from the other side, blocking the exit.

“Shit!” El said, putting one hand on Mike’s shoulder and the other on Lucas’s, pushing them both down away from the window. They all

jumped to the floor, and the four of them ducked onto their hands and knees and tried to quiet themselves, panic rising.

“See us?” Mike asked.

“Shut up!” El whispered back, grabbing his shaking hand and looking ahead to the other two boys.

They could hear car doors slamming, and footsteps approaching. Goddamn it, they’d been found out. What was she gonna do? Maybe she could wait until the door opened, and then jump out. If she had the element of surprise, she might be able to tackle someone and give the boys time to run.

She thought he heard some thuds, more footsteps, another car, but she wasn’t sure. Her ears were buzzing, fear and anger overriding her other senses. Her eyes went from door to door, wondering which one was gonna open first.

“Stay down,” she whispered. “And when I say ‘run’, you run as far as you can.”

“El?” Mike asked, his voice trembling.

She saw a flash of someone in a suit outside the window, and started to rise. His hand was on the door handle, about to open up the car and spot the children on the floor. El prepared to jump up, prepared to start screaming and fighting.

The door opened, but just as she was about to jump, a hand reached over and hit the man on the head, pushing him into the side of the car. El’s eyes widened as she watched him topple to the ground, and she looked up as his attacker peered in.

“Dad!” she yelled, relief rising in her voice. She leapt forwards, throwing her arms around Hopper and beaming.

“El, oh my God!” he said. “What the *hell* have you been doing?”

She hugged him for a while, before letting go and glancing around the junkyard. Three men were on the ground, and her Dad’s car was parked just a little farther away. She looked up at him, amazement in

her eyes. “Did you knock them all out?”

Hopper gave her a look. “Is that important right now?”

El shrugged. “A little.”

Her Dad glanced into the car, narrowing his eyes at the three kids huddled in the corner, and El suddenly remembered. “Oh! Oh, boys, you can come out now! It’s okay, it’s safe!”

It took a second for anything to happen. The first one to emerge from the car was Twelve, who leapt out from the group, jumping away and stopping right in front of Hopper, looking up with wide, curious eyes. Mike and Lucas shouted for him from the car, but he didn’t seem to notice, instead looking over Hopper, his nose starting to bleed a little. After a second, he nodded, and smiled at the officer. Hopper, meanwhile, stared down at him, narrowing his eyes a little. He seemed to recognize something about the kid, but he didn’t say anything.

The next boy to come out was Mike, who ran out and grabbed Twelve’s arm, as if to drag him back. Twelve pulled away, giving him an incredulous look, before moving closer to Hopper. There was some kind of nonverbal argument going on, which Twelve apparently won, as Mike rolled his eyes and backed a little away.

He glared up at Hopper, as he immediately moved closer to El and grabbed onto her arm. He continued his dirty looks, and El laughed nervously. “Uh, well, this is Mike. He... he’s cool. That’s Twelve, and... Lucas, you can come out now!”

Lucas slowly crept out from the car. He glanced between everyone, eventually grabbing onto Twelve’s hand.

“Okay,” Hopper said slowly, “We’ll talk about this later. We’ve got to go, *now*.”

“Where are we going?” El asked, as Hopper started to walk. She followed him, dragging Mike along with her.

“I’ll tell you in the car, come on!”

El looked to the boys and nodded at them. “Alright, let’s go.”

El finished explaining about halfway to school. Hopper was staring ahead at the road for most of it. “So, uh, then we stole a car and got to the junkyard.” El said, glancing to the backseat at the boys. “And... we’re going to school? Why’s that again?”

Hopper sighed. “Well, first of all, next time you’re secretly hiding kids in the attic, I’d like to know about it.”

El nodded. “Yeah, sorry about that.”

“We’ll talk about that later.” Hopper said. “And second, we’re going to the school cause that’s where the others are waiting for us.”

“Others?” Lucas asked.

“Jonathan Byers and Nancy.” Hopper said. “They didn’t say much, just that we should go there instead of the Byers house.”

The boys gave each other a look, and Mike said, “Why?”

Hopper sighed. “I don’t *know*, maybe the house was compromised? El, if you want to ask, my walkie-talkie’s on the floor somewhere.”

El nodded, reaching down and pushing a bag to the side, finding the communicator and grabbing it. “Nancy? Nancy, call in.”

It took a minute, but Nancy’s voice eventually answered, coming in and out. “El? El, are you okay?”

“Yeah, we’re fine. We’re on our way to school.” El said. “Why exactly are we going there?”

“Well...” Nancy trailed off, suddenly shouting in another direction. “No, no! Put that down, put it *down*! Steve, get your kid off the goddamn table!”

“Steve?” El asked, surprised.

“What kid?” Lucas asked, leaning forwards, pulling against the seatbelt. “What *kid*?”

“Sit back, we’re still driving!” Hopper called.

“El, is it Ten?” Mike asked, grabbing Twelve’s hand in his excitement. “Is it Ten?”

“Hold *on*!” El yelled back, before going to the walkie-talkie. “Nance, what kid do you have there?”

“He’s- no, no, give that back!” Nancy seemed to be struggling with the walkie-talkie.

After a second, another voice took over; he had a slight lisp, and he sounded incredibly excited- and incredibly loud. “Boys! Boys, can you hear me? Can you hear-”

If he continued, El didn’t hear it. The boys in the backseat exploded; Lucas and Mike started screaming for Ten, with the former trying to reach across the car and grab the walkie-talkie from El, and the latter bouncing in his seat and grabbing Twelve’s hand. Twelve smiled, his entire face brightening up at the sound of his friend’s voice, and he also grabbed onto Mike, grinning.

“Hey, hey!” Hopper yelled, glancing away from the road to give the boys a stern look. “Calm down! *Calm down!*”

The boys eventually quieted enough for El to hear Nancy still arguing with Ten, trying to get the walkie-talkie away from him. El responded, “Ten? Is that Ten? The boys are here, Ten, they can hear you!”

“Hi!” came Ten’s excitable voice. “Hi! I’m safe! I was with Steve! I’m going to see you real soon!”

El hit the button to answer, and let the boys speak into the communicator. They didn’t say much- they simply started screaming “*Ten! Ten! TEN!*”

Finally, Nancy spoke. “Okay, listen, you all can yell as much as you want when you get here. Please let the Chief drive, now.”

“Thank you!” Hopper sighed.

“We’ll see Ten!” Lucas said, smiling for the first time in forever.

“Ten!” Mike shouted again, excitedly.

Twelve also didn’t speak, simply grinning and holding onto Mike in excitement.

Hopper looked at El. “Are they always this excitable?”

“Absolutely not.” El said. “Lucas hated me until about a half hour ago.” She turned back to the boys. “Wow, Ten talks a lot more than you do.”

The boys paused for a second, glancing to each other. Finally, Mike said, “Papa wanted him to... to be able to say what he saw.”

*Oh.* El flinched, looking around. “Oh, I’m sorry.”

“Doesn’t matter.” Lucas shook his head, and El saw that he was smiling again. “Ten will be with us. Everyone together.”

El smiled back at him. “Yeah. You’ll all be together.”

The boys kept smiling and giggling to each other. When she was sure they were distracted, El looked back at her Dad, and quietly asked, “Dad... are we gonna find Max?”

Hopper turned to her, a sad look in his eyes. He moved one hand from the wheel, squeezing hers. “Don’t worry, kid.” he said. “We’re going to get her back.”

El nodded at him, wondering how much longer she would be able to hold onto that hope.

## 31. Curiosity Doors

### Notes for the Chapter:

ok Sorry this is so late, I had some friends come over and they stayed longer than I expected. Anyway, hope you enjoy!

### CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

#### *Curiosity Doors*

“Just stay calm,” El said, as she was about to push open the gym door. She turned back towards the three boys, who were practically buzzing with excitement. “Remember, he might be a little traumatized, you don’t want to scare him.”

“Ten doesn’t get scared.” Lucas snorted, rolling his eyes.

El gave her Dad a quick look, took a breath, and pushed the door open. She was immediately almost trampled by the boys, who rushed in, with Mike and Lucas screaming, “*Ten!*”

She backed away, letting her Dad enter, before turning to look at what they were doing. They had all tackled another boy, with Mike and Lucas’s voices raising higher, getting more excited. She walked forwards as she heard Ten’s voice join in, using much longer sentences and bigger words. She managed to get a glimpse of him behind the other boys as she got closer, seeing short, curly brown hair and a bright smile; she noticed that he didn’t have some of his teeth.

“El, oh my God!” Nancy ran forwards, enveloping the surprised girl in a quick hug, before pulling away. “Don’t *ever* run away again! Damn it!”

“Sorry.” El said, rubbing the back of her neck awkwardly. “I didn’t get in too much trouble.”



Nancy sighed and turned back, joining two other teens on the bleachers; Jonathan and Steve. The boys were only a few feet away from them, in some sort of hug pile. El ran forwards, stopping just a little away from them. Mike spotted her first, sitting up and tapping Ten on the shoulder. They all looked up at her, and she felt a little weird. “Uh, hi.” she said, waving. “I’m El.”

“El?” Ten asked, looking at the other boys.

“Safe person.” Mike explained, smiling at her. “Good person. She hid us.”

“From the Bad People.” Lucas added. Twelve nodded, too, expressing his approval.

“Well, hello.” Ten said, turning to her. “I’m Dustin.”

“Dustin?” Lucas asked, jumping a little at the new name.

He nodded. “Steve named me.”

He pointed behind them, and Steve raised a hand in greeting. “Hey.” he said. “So, uh, you’re Dustin’s weird magic friends.”

Lucas gave him a customary glare, and Mike seemed a little suspicious, but Twelve simply waved back. Suddenly, Twelve’s eyes widened, as he spotted the boy next to Steve, and broke into a run. They all stared in shock as Twelve jumped at Jonathan, throwing his arms around him and burying his head in his chest. Jonathan jumped, incredibly surprised, and he looked around the room at the others. Eventually, he put his arms around the kid, and said, “Hey, buddy. Hey, bud. How’ve you been?”

Dustin walked over first, sitting on the seat beneath Steve. “Jonathan knows Twelve?” he asked.

“I guess.” Steve shrugged.

Lucas moved by Dustin, sitting next to him and grabbing his hand, looking a little concerned. Mike turned to El, reaching out and grabbing her hand. They both walked over, sitting next to the boys.

“So...” Hopper said, and they all looked up at him. “What are we going to do?”

They looked up at him, and El said, “Oh, yeah, uh, wanna explain what *you guys* were up to?”

Hopper sighed. “This might take a while-”

“My Mom broke into the Lab with your Dad to try and find my brother,” Jonathan said, “And she’s still in there. Your Dad thinks they’re also hiding a portal to the Upside-Down. And... honestly, I don’t know why Steve’s still here.”

“I just spent the last three days trying to keep this idiot alive!” Steve said, affectionately pushing Dustin a little, causing the boy to giggle. “I’m not leaving him with you assholes!”

El looked up at her Dad. “You were investigating the Lab.” It wasn’t a question, not even really a statement. Just... a clarification.

Hopper sighed. “Yeah. Turns out Joyce is pretty set on finding her kid.”

“Her kid?” Mike asked.

Jonathan paused, and looked down at Twelve, who was still hugging him tightly. “Yeah... yeah, but the point is, she’s still in there. God knows what they’re doing to her.”

“In the Lab?” Lucas asked, looking worried.

“I think,” Hopper interrupted, “I have an idea.” They looked up at him, and he continued, “If there’s an entrance to the other dimension in the Lab-”

“The Gate.” Mike interrupted, guilt in his voice.

“-Yes, that.” Hopper said. “If the Gate is in the Lab, we can get in, but more importantly, Max can get *out*.”

“And Barb.” Nancy added.

“You want to break into the Lab?” El asked.

As she said that, Mike leaned forwards and grabbed her arm, shaking a little. Lucas and Dustin curled up, too, staring at the ground, while Twelve continued to hug Jonathan even harder, refusing to let go of the teenager.

Hopper glanced around, and nodded.

“How are we going to get Max and Barb to know we’re there?” Nancy asked. “The Upside-Down... it’s big. If you want to break into the Lab, you’re going to have to go fast. Having to look for them would take some time.”

Hopper considered, then looked down at Mike. “Can... can you talk to them?”

“What?” El said, gripping Mike’s hand tighter.

“Can you talk to them? With your... mind powers?”

Mike paused, glancing behind him to El, Lucas and Dustin. He seemed unsure, scared. “I... I don’t know.” he said.

The kids glanced at each other, and Dustin said, very quietly, “Mike, while I was with Steve, he taught me a new word.”

Steve jumped, staring down at him in horror.

“That word was ‘friend.’”

Steve settled down, sighing in relief.

“El taught us ‘friend’, too.” Mike said. “We’re friends.”

Dustin smiled at this compliment, then said, “Well, El’s our friend. And Nancy, too. And their friends are in trouble. We should try to help them.”

Mike nodded slowly, looking down at his feet. “I want to help... but, the dark place... I haven’t gone in without the Bath.”

“The Bath?” Nancy asked.

Mike flinched, staring back at the floor, and said quietly, “Big tub. Of water. All dark.”

“Like a sensory-deprivation tank?” Hopper asked.

Mike shrugged.

“Where the *hell* do we get a sensory deprivation tank?” Nancy asked.

They all looked at each other in confusion. After a long while of silence, Dustin said, “You know, Steve taught me another word. It’s fu-”

Steve jumped forwards, slapping a hand over Dustin’s mouth. “*And* that’s enough learning for today!”

Dustin threw him off, giggling and yelling, “I am on a *Curiosity Voyage*!”

El froze, before slowly turning to the boy. “What did you say?”

“Curiosity Voyage.” Dustin giggled. “Steve wrote it in the science book.”

“Damnit, I gave you my middle school science book?” Steve asked, glaring down at him. “Why the hell did I do that?”

“You made funny drawings.” Dustin added. “Violent, but funny.”

“Curiosity Voyage...” El said quietly, then turned to her Dad. “Dad, do the phones here still work? I need to call someone.”

“Mr. Clarke?”

They were all gathered around El, who was sitting on a table, twirling the phone cord with her finger. “Hi,” she said sweetly, “I have a science question... Do you know anything about sensory deprivation tanks? Specifically, how to build one?”

They all glanced at each other. Was she kidding? Was she going to be that obvious?

El paused, listening to Mr. Clarke's response, then said, "Fun."

She scrunched up her face, flinching at her own words. Hopper slapped his hand to his forehead, and Nancy groaned and stared up at the ceiling. She then continued, "Listen, Mr. Clarke, I know it sounds weird, but, I'd just, really, *really* like to know this. It's very important for my..."

"Curiosity Doors!" Dustin suggested.

"Curiosity Door." El repeated, before shooting him an annoyed look. "It's locked, Mr. Clarke. Help me unlock my Curiosity Doors."

After a second, she snapped and covered the receiver before saying, "I need paper and a pencil, now."

Nancy simply picked El's bag off the floor and tossed it to her. El dug out a book and pencil, flipping to the back and starting to write.

As she did, Jonathan glanced around the group. Hopper was leaning against the wall, watching his daughter with slight concern. Nancy had her arms crossed, watching as El wrote stuff down. Mike was sitting next to El on the table, glancing down at her hand as if he wanted to grab it. Steve was standing a little outside the group, glancing around nervously. The other three boys- Dustin, Lucas and Twelve- were also standing together, holding hands and glancing at each other.

Jonathan paused, then went over to the kids, kneeling down in front of Twelve. Lucas looked away from him as he arrived, but Dustin simply smiled. "Twelve trusts you." he said, smiling. "He says you have a nice light."

"Uh, I guess." Jonathan said, as Twelve beamed at him. "W-wait, he talked to you?"

Dustin shook his head. "He tapped. The Tapping Code. He only talks when he has to."

“What’d he say?”

Dustin considered. “He said you two have almost the same light.”

*Almost the same... aura?* Jonathan guessed. Well, that definitely settled it. He turned to Twelve, about to say something, only to see that Twelve’s nose was bleeding again. He wasn’t looking at Jonathan, instead scanning the room. He smiled at Hopper, squinting a little, and pointed Steve out to Dustin, nodding at him, which made Dustin smile.

Twelve then turned to Nancy, narrowing his eyes. He glanced between Nancy and Mike, bewilderment turning to recognition, then back to confusion. After a second, Jonathan reached forwards, brushing against Twelve’s hand and saying, “Hey?”

Twelve blinked, then wiped the blood away from his nose and looked back at Jonathan, smiling weakly.

“Can, uh,” Jonathan asked, “Can we talk for a second?”

Lucas and Dustin looked carefully at him, as if trying to decide if he was going to do something to Twelve. However, the boy simply shrugged and nodded, reluctantly releasing Lucas’s hand and grabbing Jonathan’s.

Jonathan took a deep breath, and walked Twelve a little away from the group. Nancy and Steve both shot him quick, worried looks, but neither of them said anything.

He walked him to the other side of the room- that seemed far enough away- and then stopped, kneeling in front of him, getting onto his eye-level. “Twelve...” he said, very carefully, not sure exactly how to explain what he wanted to ask. “Twelve... you know how I talk about my Mom, and how she’s in trouble? Do you... do you know what a Mom is?”

Twelve shook his head, curiosity in his eyes. It made Jonathan’s heart sink. This kid didn’t even *know*...

“Well, um, most people have a Mom.” Jonathan said. “She’s, uh, she’s the person who... who takes care of you, and makes sure you’re

alright and happy, and... and stuff.”

Twelve’s eyes widened, and he pointed at himself, as a question.

“Yes, you... you have a Mom.” Jonathan said, a confidence in that statement. “But, um... I... Twelve, I think your Dad- Papa- I think he kidnapped you.”

He got another questioning look, and he said, “I think he... I think he took you away from your Mom, from your birth family, I think he took you away and wasn’t going to give you back.”

Twelve stared ahead, the idea sinking into his head. He bit his lip and stared at the ground, then nodded; he apparently saw the sense in that.

Jonathan sighed. “Um, well... twelve years ago, my Mom gave birth to my brother, and the Doctors said he was dead. But Mom didn’t believe they were right. She... she thought he was kidnapped. And... she thought the Lab kidnapped him.”

It took Twelve a second to realize what he was saying. His eyes widened, and he stared at Jonathan in shock.

“You... you said we had a similar light.” Jonathan said, hoping to God that he wouldn’t cry, he was about to cry, he couldn’t cry. “Twelve... I think, I think you’re my brother.”

There was a long, long pause, as Twelve stared at Jonathan, looking confused, searching, scared, thoughtful, hopeful. Finally, Twelve took a long breath, and jumped forwards, hugging Jonathan again, his arms pressing against him as if he was the only thing keeping him on Earth, burying his head in his shoulder. He was shaking a little, maybe crying, but Jonathan could tell they weren’t sad tears.

The tears he was crying, as he hugged his brother back, weren’t sad either.

## 32. The Bath

### CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

#### *The Bath*

Making a makeshift sensory-deprivation tank was pretty damn complicated.

First, Jonathan had to make a trip to the General Store, using his Mom's leftover key to break in through the back and letting Twelve leave money up front as they "borrowed" an inflatable kiddie pool; the boy was inseparable from him now. Thankfully, though, the next ingredient was rather simple; when El informed everyone that they needed 1500 pounds of Salt, Hopper told them that there was some De-Icing Salt kept in the back of the school, something that made Dustin quite happy- he said something about "I knew we were supposed to be here!" While Nancy and Steve grabbed the hose, Hopper and El ran out back to grab the salt, leaving Lucas, Mike and Dustin to wait for them in the gym.

"You'll be back?" Mike asked her, grabbing her hand before she could go, worry in his eyes.

El nodded. "Yes, very soon. I'll only be gone a few minutes."

"Promise?"

"Promise."

She and Hopper started to leave, running out back to the storage area; when she glanced back, she saw Mike gripping Lucas's arm, burying his head in his shoulder, while Dustin sat next to them, probably about to give him a hug.

It was pretty easy to break into the storage closet; Hopper simply hit the handle with a rock, and started loading the bags into a wheelbarrow that El had spotted in the hallway. "So," he said, while throwing the bag, "What do those kids even do all day?"



El considered. “Well, uh, Mike likes *Peter Pan*. I’m pretty sure he can read it, I think. He mostly likes the pictures, he really likes pretty things. Lucas just kinda glares at me and plays with the lamp. I don’t know much about Twelve, I only met him today.”

Hopper didn’t respond at first, obviously still thinking. El bit her lip and kept her silence until they’d already started pushing the wheelbarrow across the yard; she spotted the school front, and finally stared down at the salt as she said, “Listen, I... I’m sorry. I know I should’ve told you, but Mike was just so scared and I didn’t want you to know I went to find Max, and then Mike said that the Bad People would kill us if they knew we knew about them, and...”

Hopper stopped pushing, and put a hand on her shoulder, staring down at her. “Listen, kid, I get it. It was a scary situation, and you did the right thing by taking care of the boys. But next time, it’d be really nice to know about something so important.”

El nodded. “I’ll tell you next time, I swear. No more secrets.”

After a second, Hopper asked, “So, uh, do I have to give this ‘Mike’ kid the ‘boyfriend talk’ or...”

“What? No.” El said, pulling a disgusted face to hide her heart flutter. “Ew, no. No.”

The hoses were attached to the faucets on the side of the wall, and El and Dustin held the hoses against the pool, waiting until they’d filled up and hit the right temperature, which Steve judged with a thermometer. Hopper and Jonathan dumped in the salt, and El tested their new Tank, dropping an egg into the water. When it sunk, they added more salt, and the next egg floated.

Hopper and Nancy put the walkie-talkie on a side-table, letting it buzz loudly on the channel they’d last heard Max on. As they did, El glanced around the room, her heart stopping when she realized she couldn’t see Mike. She ran over to Twelve, who was still holding onto Jonathan’s arm, and asked, “Hey, where’s Mike?”

It took Twelve a second to remember who ‘Mike’ was, and he pointed to the corner of the room, at the bleachers. Mike was sitting in the top corner, hugging himself, head in his knees.

El rushed over, jumping up the steps and sitting by him. “Hey.” she said, curling up her knees, too. “Are... are you gonna be okay?”

Mike looked up, staring blankly at nothing. He didn’t respond.

El reached over, grabbing his hand. “Hey, I just... I know this is hard for you. But... what you’re doing, for us, for Max and Barb... thank you. And if it gets too bad in there, don’t feel like you have to keep going. Just come out, and we’ll think of something else.”

Mike finally looked at her, with an expression of grim determination, and he nodded.

El smiled a little, then reached over and hugged him. “You’ll be okay.” she said. “I’ll be right here.”

“I know.” Mike said quietly. “I trust you.”

Mike gave El his socks and jacket, placing a strip of fabric over his eyes as a blindfold and stepping into the water. He flinched at the cold, before falling onto his back, floating in the water.

He didn’t see the lights flicker off, nor did he see everyone staring at him, or hear the buzzing of the walkie-talkie go out. He focused on the pictures he’d been shown; *Barb. Max. Find Barb. Find Max.*

He opened his eyes, and he was in the Mind Place. He walked around for a bit, seeing only blackness ahead. After a second, he called out, “Barb?”

Something flickered ahead, and he started to walk forwards. “Barbara?”

There was definitely something ahead. It looked like someone laying down, on a pile of mud. He started walking ahead, his eyes widening in more horror as he started to see more. The girl was covered in

slime and goo, the same slime and goo that had dripped from the Monster, that had appeared on the Gate. He stepped almost above her, and screamed.

Her eyes were gone, and some slug thing was emerging from her mouth.

“Is Barb okay?” Mike thought he heard, somewhere distant, somewhere far, far away. “Is she okay?”

“GONE!” Mike screamed, starting to run from the corpse. “GONE!”

He kept repeating the words, his voice raising, tears starting to form. He screamed until he heard more words, much more calming words, but still far away. “It’s okay, kid. It’s okay. We’re here.” It sounded like the man who called himself El’s Dad, but his voice was much softer than he’d heard before.

Mike took a breath to steady himself, now far enough away that the corpse was gone. He blinked back more tears and decided to find the other one. The other friend. The one who was, hopefully, still alive.

*Max.* he thought. *I want to find Max.*

He turned, and there was a shed behind him.

It was the Shed that they’d gone to, the one Max was hiding in; he’d sensed her presence, he knew she was on the Other Side, he could feel it when he saw her picture, he sometimes saw her when he closed his eyes and slept, hiding and sobbing. So he approached the shed, walking past a door that was knocked open, and looking inside.

It took him a while, but he finally spotted her in the corner, her red hair dirty and wet. She was lying on the floor, barely moving, and as Mike approached, he could hear the quietest, faintest voice rising.

*“W-w-why does m-my h-h-h-heart go o-on beating... w-why d-d-d-do these eyes of mine c-cry?”*

He crept closer, until he was sitting in front of her.

*“D-d-don’t they kn-know, i-it’s the e-e-e-e-end of t-the world... it ended*

*when you s-s-s-said...*

“Max?”

He heard another voice, that sounded like El and Hopper- it was hard to tell who was saying what, their sentences overlapped, but he picked up, “Tell her we’re coming. We’re coming for her.”

“Hopper is coming.” Mike said quietly, reaching out and grabbing her hand. “El is coming. We’re saving you.”

Max shuddered, letting out a sick, broken cough. “H-hurry...” she whispered.

“Where is she?” came El’s terrified voice. “Tell her we’re coming through the Gate!”

“Just hold on.” Mike said, shaking Max’s hand a little, not sure if she was still awake. “Just a little longer, Max. Max!”

The shed started to evaporate, boxes disappearing into the air, the wood turning to dust. Slowly, Max started to vanish, too, leaving behind only the blackness that the Mind Place always held.

“Max?” Mike started to scream, panicking. “Max! Max!”

He screamed, and sobbed, and jumped out of the Mind Place.

Suddenly, he was in the pool, and he felt arms around him; they were strong, and large, and not El’s. Hopper was hugging him, saying, “It’s okay, kid. It’s okay.”

El grabbed him, too, hugging him from the other side, not caring if water splashed onto her. Which, it did, because Lucas jumped into the water, joining in the hug, and then Dustin was there, and finally Twelve, who barely managed to squeeze in. Mike just kept crying.

Max was alone again.

She thought he heard someone, but all she could do was respond a

little. She could barely hear. She could barely process what was going on anymore. She didn't feel cold anymore, she didn't feel sick, she didn't feel scared. She felt nothing. She wondered if that was on purpose, if that *Thing* wanted her to lose all emotion before it got her. She didn't care if it did anymore.

The only thing she did was sing. She only remembered four songs, only four. Her Dad didn't share her music taste, and her stepbrother and stepfather only played what they liked. El had records, though. And there were four songs she knew, the four most important.

She remembered *Sweet Dreams*. It was the newest of her favorites, released just this year. El had gotten her the record for her birthday, knowing she'd like the music. She hid it from her brother, playing it when he was out of the house and she was alone, and she loved it. The song reminded her of safety, of being home alone with no one to hurt her or stop her or make her feel helpless.

She remembered *Landslide*. When she'd met El on the playground, all those years ago, El had been singing it. Under her breath. Max had remembered her Dad singing it to her, so she joined in. Quietly. She didn't know if El even heard. But she remembered that day.

She remembered *End of the World*. It was old, a little older than *Landslide*. But it was one of Hopper's records, and she remembered it playing when she snuck over the one day, after her Stepdad had gotten angry, too angry, and she stayed there for the night, and Hopper made her hot chocolate, and El braided her hair and talked about DnD and they let her think about anything other than home.

And she remembered *We'll Meet Again*. That was even older than *Landslide*, she thought Hopper said it was from a World War. But he had the record, and El had played it when they were sleeping over. They'd danced all night to it, learned morse code by tapping out the lyrics.

"*We'll... m-meet again...*" she sung then, the words barely escaping her lips. "*D-don't know w-where... d-don't know when...*"

There was a loud, earth-shattering screech. She knew what that meant. It meant that *it* was coming. The Monster. She didn't care. She

took another breath, and figured that this was it. If she was going down, then, she wasn't going to let that thing know she was scared of it.

*"B-but I k-know... we'll meet again..."*

It burst through the door, and everything went black.

## 33. Leaving

### CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

#### *Leaving*

El noticed when Hopper got up to leave.

Mike had a towel wrapped around him, shivering in the cold air. The other kids were surrounding him, trying to hug him and calm him, and El was right in the middle. However, she saw her Dad say something to the teens, and walk away. She turned to Mike and said, "I'll be right back, okay?"

Mike nodded, and she rushed after him.

She caught up with her Dad in the parking lot, the night sky above them. "Where the *hell* do you think you're going?" she asked, crossing her arms.

He turned around, staring her down. "No, no. You're staying here."

"You're going to the Lab alone?" El asked.

"El, you're not coming."

"I want to help!" El yelled. "Dad, I want to *help*!"

"No, no way!" Hopper crossed his arms. "You're staying *right here*!"

"Dad, I want to help Max!" El said, angry tears forming in her eyes. "We have to save Max, let me help, let me *help*!"

"You're staying here, where it's safe!"

"Nowhere is safe, Dad! We're all getting hunted by Monsters and Secret Agents and *shit*, and everything is *bullshit* and we have to save Max-!"

“El, listen to me!” Hopper said, his voice finally rising above hers, and she stopped for a second, breathing heavily and glaring up at him. He dropped his stare, and he looked... *God*, he looked sad. “El, I’m going in there to save Joyce and Max, but there’s a Monster and a Lab that hates us, and... and I don’t think I could live with myself if you came in there with me and didn’t come out.”

El took a few, deep, steadying breaths, and then ran forwards and hugged her Dad, wrapping her arms around him. They hugged in the dark, quiet parking lot for a long time, and then Hopper said, “You keep those boys outta trouble. They’re good kids.”

“Please...” El said quietly. “Please, you come back home. You bring her back, and you come home.”

Jim Hopper sighed, and hugged her tighter. “Promise.”

Steve found Jonathan and Nancy sitting in the hall, under a painting of a tiger’s head. They were talking about something, and they looked up at him, guilty and slightly scared expressions on their face. He remembered that he still wore the bruises from their last fight on his face, and he felt his face go red, too.

“Um...” he put his hands in his pockets, glancing at the gym doors. “Mind if I... can I say something?”

Nancy and Jonathan just kept staring, and Steve finally said, “Listen, I... what I did was shitty. It was completely shitty and I shouldn’t have done it and... I’m sorry, I helped the guy clean off the movie theater and told Tommy and Carol to piss off, but that’s not gonna make up for it, so...”

“Steve.” Nancy said, and he immediately turned to her. “Steve, let’s just... forget it for now.”

Steve sighed, and moved to sit down next to her, staring at her dejected look. “I... I’m sorry about Barb.”

Nancy took a deep breath, and nodded.



He turned to Jonathan. "I... I'm sorry about your Mom, too."

"Hopper's going to the Lab for her." Jonathan said quietly. "They're gonna get out."

Steve narrowed his eyes at the two of them. "What... what were you doing before I got here?"

Nancy gave him a glare.

"I don't mean, 'were you making out', cause I really don't care if you were," Steve said, though that last bit wasn't true, "I mean, were you guys... what are you planning?"

He could recognize that drive in Nancy's eyes. The wheels of her brain were turning, and she was thinking of something.

"Nothing." she lied.

"Nance..."

She sighed. "Look, Hopper's going to get to that Lab, and chances are Joyce won't be able to help him much in getting Max out of Hell. If we can get the Monster away from him..."

"You want to be *bait*?" Steve asked, his eyes widening.

"No." Jonathan spoke up, shaking his head. "We're gonna kill the damn thing."

"You're going to *what*?"

"Kill it." Nancy said. "If we get to the Police Station, we can get our supplies and set up traps."

"*Here*?"

"My house." Jonathan said. "Nobody will be there."

"Nance, you're gonna die." Steve said. "No, no way, I'm not letting you two kill yourselves."

"We'll bring that bastard down with us." Nancy said.

Before Jonathan could respond, the gym door burst open, and Lucas ran out, staring at the three teens.

“Ten- Dustin!” he said. “Touched El! Vision!”

“Shit!” Steve said, jumping to his feet and running inside. Nancy and Jonathan followed close behind.

Mike was still wrapped in a towel, watching with slight concern as Dustin sat, frozen in place. El was sputtering, looking incredibly worried as she stared at the kid. Twelve was sitting on the other side of Mike, leaning against his shoulder. He spotted Jonathan, though, and sat up, looking ready to run to him.

Steve kneeled down in front of Dustin, getting eye-level with him. “How long ago?” he asked.

“I dunno...?” El said. “I just walked in and punched him on the shoulder and... maybe thirty seconds ago?”

“Okay, so it shouldn’t be too much longer.” Steve sighed.

“Did he do this a lot?” Nancy asked from behind him.

Steve shook his head. “Only once in a while. But you figure out pretty quick what the right things to do are.” He turned to the boys; Lucas had sat next to Twelve, grabbing his arm and shooting a quick glare to Jonathan. “Did... did he ever do this near you guys?”

“Only a little.” Lucas responded.

“Only on accident.” Mike added, very quietly.

“Only on purpose when Papa asked.” Lucas said quietly. “Papa asked a lot.”

Steve sighed. “Jesus Christ, you kids had such a shitty life.”

Twelve looked up at Jonathan and Nancy, narrowing his eyes. He tapped on the bleacher, some sort of code that Steve didn’t know.



Jonathan had to think for a second to translate in his head, and then said, “No, no. Uh... Nancy and I, we’re going to go for a sec.”

Twelve’s eyes widened in horror, and he jumped up, rushing to the teenager and clutching onto his leg, shaking his head wildly.

“Listen, kid, listen.” Jonathan said. “Look, we’re going to go take care of that Monster. We’re going to make sure Hopper and Max and Mom are safe. But we’re not dragging you in, it’s too dangerous.”

Twelve shook his head again, still clutching onto Jonathan.

“We can help!” El added, jumping to her feet.

“No, no, you little shits are staying here.” Steve said. “Where you can’t get killed.”

“Are you going?” Lucas asked, shocked.

“Oh, hell no, and if I can help it, they’re not going either.” Steve said, gesturing to Jonathan and Nancy.

“Excuse me?” Nancy said.

“This is a suicide mission.” Steve said.

“It doesn’t have to be.” Jonathan piped up. “This monster-”

“Demogorgon.” El interrupted.

“Sure, yeah, it’s not invincible. Hopper says that Max shot it, right? There’s gotta be some way to kill it.” Jonathan glanced down at Twelve, who was still holding onto him. “But it *will* be dangerous, so you’re staying here.”

“You should go with them.” El said, looking at Steve. “They’re gonna need help.”

“No way am I leaving you alone.” Steve said.

“We can take care of ourselves!” El huffed, crossing her arms.

“You’re twelve years old!” Steve said. “We’re not going anywhere!”

“No.” said a quiet, shaking voice, and they all turned to stare at Dustin, who had stood up, looking sadly up at Steve. “You have to go.”

“Sorry, *what?*” Steve asked, disbelief echoing in his voice.

“You have to go with them.” Dustin said, gesturing to a very surprised Nancy and Jonathan. “In my vision, you’re with them. You’re all together. You have to go.”

“*Hell* no.” Steve shook his head. “Dustin, I’m not leaving you because of some random future vision.”

“*Steve.*” Dustin said, staring down at his feet and standing very still. “Steve, we know very few things about my visions, but we know something very important. Every time we change a vision- every time we make the future different- something *worse* happens. If you don’t go, something worse happens.”

Steve paused, looking between the boys. “Dustin, I- I can’t just leave you here.”

“Steve.” Dustin said, smiling and shuffling his feet. “Mike can kill things with his mind. So can Lucas, but it’s a bit harder for him.”

El turned to him sharply. “Sorry, what was that?”

“If I’m safe anywhere, I’m safe with them.” Dustin said. “Just go.”

Steve sighed and kneeled down to Dustin’s eye level. “Okay, just... stay safe, okay? I don’t know what I’d do if you got killed.”

“I’ll be okay.” Dustin said. “You be safe.”

Steve surprised everyone- including himself- by reaching forwards and wrapping the boy in a hug. It only lasted a second, but once Steve pulled away, he knew that his bad-boy reputation was totally destroyed around this group forever. He turned to the other teens and said, his voice quiet, “Alright. Let’s go.”

Nancy nodded, biting her lip and glancing to the ground, and Jonathan eventually managed to pry a reluctant Twelve from his legs,

the boy glancing between the teenager and Dustin, the most pathetic look in his eyes. Jonathan said to him, only just loud enough for Steve to hear, "Don't worry. I'll be back, and then I'll never leave you again."

Twelve nodded a little at Jonathan, then immediately ran over to Mike on the bleachers, hugging him and keeping his eyes shut, pointedly not looking at the others. Steve sighed and turned to the teenagers, before saying, "So. Who's gonna drive us there?"

Hopper honestly should've expected this.

He drove to the Lab, the same tools he and Joyce had used before to break into the Lab in a bag in his car. He cut the fence again, expecting that if he kept to the shadows, he'd be able to make it.

He was barely a few feet in when he was surrounded, on all sides, by guards, with guns in one hand and a bright flashlight in another.

*Goddamn it.*

The kids all sat in silence on the bleachers after the teens left. Twelve eventually let go of Mike, simply sitting and kicking his legs. El sat on Mike's other side, occasionally putting her head on his shoulder or grabbing his hand. Lucas sat on the bleacher above, glancing between them and Dustin, who sat next to him and looked ready to cry at any time.

Eventually, Lucas said, "El?"

"Yeah?"

"If the Bad Men come... what do we do?"

El sighed. "We'll run. Into the woods. We can stay there, and if they keep looking for us, it's maybe a day's walk to get to another town. From there, it'll be easy to get somewhere to wait out the storm, wait for Dad to find us."

"If they keep finding us?" Lucas asked. "Keep wanting us to go back?"

She looked to Mike, who was still shaking a little. "Then they can eat shit." She looked up at Lucas, determination setting in her eyes. "They're never taking you back."

They sat in silence some more, until Dustin said, "Steve showed me where the food is. I'll get us something."

As he stood, Lucas jumped to his feet, grabbing his hand. Dustin seemed surprised, but nodded as the two of them departed.

Once in the Kitchen, Lucas waited a while to talk. Dustin had already opened a fridge door, pulling out cups of chocolate pudding, when he finally said, "What did you see?"

Dustin paused, staring inside the fridge. "Told you. Monster hunting."

"What did you *see*?"

"There's nothing else to say. Monster hunting."

"Ten?"

"Dustin." he corrected, slowly turning to look at Lucas.

"Dustin," Lucas said, very calmly, "Friends don't lie."

Of course Lucas knew. He always knew when something was wrong with his friends. He sighed. "Look, it's not important."

"Don't lie."

"Lucas, please..."

Lucas reached out, grabbing Dustin's arm. "Don't *lie*."

"He *died*, okay?" Dustin jerked away, dropping pudding cups to the floor and not caring. "If Steve stays here, he dies shielding us from *something*, something I can't see. If he's with them, he's got a chance."

Lucas understood, he was sure, but he still looked so angry. “*Dustin!*” he said. “Dustin, changing the vision makes the vision worse!”

“Maybe they were wrong.” Dustin said, not meeting his friend’s eyes. “Maybe they just didn’t test enough.”

“Dustin.”

“I can’t just let him die because something *might* happen.”

Lucas took a deep breath, then gave him a dark look. “If something worse happens, it’s because of you.”

Dustin sighed. “I- I know.”

The two stared at each other for a long while, then Lucas said, “I’m sorry. Let’s get back.”

Dustin nodded, and they both jumped when the doors opened. Twelve came in, biting his lip. He tapped out a quick message on the wall.

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“Sorry.” Dustin shrugged. “Couldn’t find the pudding.”

Twelve glanced at the floor.

“Sad?” Lucas asked.

In response, Twelve walked up and hugged Lucas, sobbing into his chest. Lucas hugged him back, and Dustin joined them, too.

The three boys hugged in the kitchen, as if they were the only people in the world. As if they could get rid of their worries just by being together. Just by *staying* together.

That feeling wouldn’t last.

## 34. The Upside-Down

### Notes for the Chapter:

Hey so you may have noticed that "36 chapters" changed to "37". That's cause I kinda... accidentally miscounted. Well anyway you all get one extra chapter before Season Two, so I hope you like that.

Speaking of which, the Season Two writing has been... kind of a hurricane. I'm actually almost done- I just finished the "Lost Sister" chapters- and I really hope y'all don't mind me cutting-and-pasting characters. I had to ditch some new characters and introduce others at different points, but, hey, that's how AUs work, huh?

Anyway, have fun with these last few chapters of Part One!

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

#### *The Upside-Down*

They tried everything to get Hopper to talk.

First, their agents came in. Told him that they wanted to help. They wanted to kill the Monster that had taken six people in a week. But Hopper just told them to piss off, and they didn't like that. So they tried the taser. And when they asked him again what he knew, he looked up at them and said, "I know you do experiments on kidnapped little kids. And I know you went a little too far this time and you messed up in a big way. I mean, you really messed up, didn't you? Big time. That's why you're trying to cover your tracks. You killed Benny Hammond, you faked Max's death. I know everything."

They didn't like that either. So he got tased again and forced into a chair. One agent brought out the drugs. "You're just a junkie. A small



town cop who had a really bad week. Took one too many pills this time.”

“Did I?” Hopper said, keeping his face normal. “Is that what you’re going to tell my daughter?”

Ah, there it was. A flash of fear in the agent’s eyes; they didn’t care about El, he knew, but she could poke quite a few holes in their story no matter how much she knew. “You made a mistake coming back here.” he said, bluffing.

“No, I didn’t.” Hopper said. “Here’s what’s gonna happen. You’re gonna let me and Joyce Byers go, you’re gonna give us anything we need, and we’re gonna find Max. And then we’re gonna forget any of this ever happened.”

One of the agents looked down at him, a look of pure skepticism on her face. “Oh, is that right?”

“Yeah. That’s right.”

They left him alone for a while, to the point where he wondered if they were just planning on keeping him in Solitary for a while. Finally, though, a man entered, the man Hopper recognized as Dr. Brenner. He silently offered him a cigarette and asked, “Where are the boys?”

Hopper sighed as smoke filled the air. A part of him knew that this was wrong, that if the boys got back into the Lab... the other part of him, though, knew that there was no way Max had much time left. He wasn’t going to lose her, too, not like Sara. And all four boys were together. He still wasn’t exactly sure what powers they had, but they’d escaped the Lab before. If all else failed, he still had his tools to break in.

“We’re gonna make a deal.” he said simply. “Nobody’s ever gonna find out about this. My daughter, and the Byers family, you’re gonna leave them alone. Then I’ll tell you.”

That seemed to be enough for Brenner.

Joyce was sitting at the table, wishing to God she knew what was going on. The alarms had gone off at least five times since she'd been locked up, and she couldn't get anything out of the guards who would drop food off with her. So, when the door opened, she looked up with a dark glare, expecting another scientist to come in and get information out of her, to try and convince her to stop talking shit about what they'd done.

She immediately stopped glaring when Jim Hopper walked in.

She stood up, about to run to him, only to freeze when more guards followed after him. "Hopper?"

"It's okay, Joyce. Just stay with me." he said. "We're gonna walk you out, and then I'm going to find Max."

Joyce gave him a look. "We're going to find Max."

Hopper looked like he wanted to argue, "Look, we don't have much time--"

"I'm coming, Hop."

He sighed. "Alright. But stay with me. I'll explain on the way."

She shut up, glaring ahead as he simply said that everything that happened with the Lab had to remain secret, and they would be allowed to find Max. She asked about Will. He didn't meet her eye when he said that he didn't know anything. She didn't press; they were surrounded by guards, this wasn't the time to figure out what he'd been doing all this time. So she followed him into a room, where they were given suits to protect them from a toxic atmosphere, and they were walked to the Gate.

It was big, almost covering the wall, and it was slimy, and dark, and seemed to be moving. Hopper and Joyce simply gave each other a quick look, before they walked inside.

It was just like their world, except... *not*. It was dark, and some sort of web covered everything.

“Hey, are you alright?” Hopper asked, a few feet into the Upside-Down.

She nodded.

“I need you to relax, okay?” he said. “Slow down your breathing, take deep breaths. In and out.”

“I know how to breathe, Hop.” she said. He seemed distracted, looking ahead into the darkness. Their flashlights seemed to be the only source of light.

After a second, he said, “Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Are you?” she asked.

He didn’t respond, and they kept walking.

They could find the Shed easily. It wasn’t that far into the forest, and Hopper and Joyce were walking pretty quickly.

The problem, though, was that the Shed was ripped to pieces.

Boxes, or pieces of them, were everywhere. Whatever was inside was smashed or ripped or split in two. The building itself? That was a joke. And Max was nowhere to be found.

“Max?” Hopper started to yell.

“What the hell happened?” Joyce muttered under her breath.

“Max!” Hopper called, looking around the forest, as if the girl might be hiding in the trees. She couldn’t be gone, she *couldn’t*-

Joyce grabbed his hand, and pointed to the ground. “What?” he asked, seeing nothing.

“Tracks.”

He looked closer. “I don’t see any.”

Joyce sighed. “I can see it, it’s just hidden a little. Follow me.”

They followed the trail that only Joyce could see into the Library- or, well, the Other Library. It was colder, damper, darker. And, of course, most of the slime-webs went in that direction. It took a while to get the door in, but they managed to make it budge wide enough for them to fit through.

There were no books in the Upside-Down. There were, however, droplets of blood, leading into different rooms. Joyce and Hopper silently followed the trail, worried energy drifting from both of them. At times, Hopper swore he could hear the Monster, but it might have been the wind, what little there was.

“Oh my God.” Joyce said, shining a light in one web, to reveal a human skeleton. Hopper himself shone a light on what looked to be a shattered eggshell, and nearby, a newer corpse.

He recognized it as Barb Holland, but it wasn’t Barb Holland anymore. Her skin was porcelain-white, covered in slime, and tendrils of *something* were shooting from her mouth. He turned the light away, the sight making him sick, and turned the flashlight at the wall.

Where Max Mayfield was trapped.

The two adults froze, and Hopper was the first to run over. “Max!” he yelled, immediately reaching to pull the webbing off of her. She was pale, too pale, and her eyes were shut, a single tendril reaching into her mouth. He reached up and pulled the thing out, dragging it until it hit the floor. It was impossibly long, but once it was out of her mouth and on the ground, it started to squirm and move.

Joyce yelled, and Hopper tossed her the gun he’d been provided. She began to shoot the thing, its squeals echoing across the walls, as Hopper pried Max away from the wall.

She wasn’t breathing. Oh, God, she wasn’t breathing. *Why wasn’t she breathing?*

Hopper turned to Joyce, who'd finally shot the thing into silence and stood over them. Hopper ripped his helmet off , and turned to Joyce. "Joyce, help me." he said, and in a moment, her helmet was off, and they were kneeling above the body. He started pushing on her chest, counting in his head.

"I need you to tilt her head back-"

"Okay-"

"And lift her chin. Now, when I tell you, you're gonna pinch her nostrils and breath into her mouth twice."

"Okay."

"One second, then pause. Then one second."

"Okay."

"Now, go!"

Joyce breathed into the body as Hopper kept pushing on her chest. "Come on, Max!" he said, a rare fear growing in his voice. "Come on, Max! We've gotta get home! We're gonna go home to El, and to Hawkins, and to the Arcade and records and your dumb skateboarding tricks that get you in the Hospital-"

He remembered a scene like this all too well. When Sara was in the hospital, and she wasn't breathing, and the Doctors couldn't get her to start again. She'd flatlined, and he couldn't do anything. But he could do something.

He knew that Max wasn't his daughter. She had her own Father, in California, and her own Mother in Hawkins. But her Father was far away, and her Mother didn't pay attention to her, and she had to deal with her shitty excuse of a Stepfamily on her own. He swore she spent more nights at his place then El's. And she'd told him about her problems, and asked him for help with homework, and showed him her new skateboarding tricks, and he was *not* going to let her die here. Not now. Not *ever*.

With one final push, Max shot up, a deep, ragged breath emerging

from her lungs.

Hopper didn't cry often. But he hugged her, and he got her a gas mask, and she started to cry, and he just said, "It's okay, you did good. You're safe. You're going home."

"Oh my God!" Joyce said, as Max kept gasping for air. "Max, Max, you're safe. Keep breathing."

Max seemed confused, still struggled to stay awake. She slowly turned to Hopper, and recognition sparked in her eyes. "D-Dad..." she said.

She was alive.

## 35. Goodbye, El

### Notes for the Chapter:

Okay so

1) Season Two is gonna be long, guys. Like, it's gonna have upwards of Forty Chapters. Turns out that having one extra episode in a season and an AU that has to combine four boys' character arcs into one girl's and one girl's arc into four boys' will turn out... complicated. lol I hope you're ready for this wild ride

2) This is probably the longest chapter in the entire fic and it was super fun to write and you're all going to hate me for this, have fun! :D

### CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

#### *Goodbye, El*

The lights went out, and the teens turned to each other.

They were all sweaty, and tired, and had cuts in their hands that they probably should have cleaned better. But they'd done it. Nancy shot the Monster, Steve beat it with a baseball bat, and Jonathan set it on fire. And it had disappeared, and hadn't come back.

"Do you think it's dead?" Steve asked, as they dumped all their disassembled traps into a pile in the corner of the room.

"I don't know." Nancy responded. "But it's not coming back. We've done all we can..."

They stared at each other, and then Jonathan said, "Let's get back to the kids. Before they get into any trouble."

They nodded, and Nancy smiled at them. "I can't believe we became

parents in the span of a week.”

El got up to look out the window real quick, to see if the teens were back yet. When she saw nothing, she turned around and saw that Mike had stood up, dropping the towel onto the bleachers. “Mike?” she said, running back over to him. “You okay?”

He nodded, and El smiled. “Come on. The boys’re gonna bring us food, we should probably go sit at the table.”

Mike seemed confused, but walked with her, slipping his hand into hers. It was amazing how nice it felt to be holding hands with him; El felt her heart jump every time his fingers wrapped around hers. Even after they sat, their hands were still together, and El kept glancing at Mike. He looked at her, and smiled that *nice* smile, and she smiled back, and then she took a deep breath and said, “So... you think the boys found the pudding? Max thinks the Lunch Lady’s hoarding it.”

“Putting?” Mike asked, cocking his head to the side.

“It’s... it’s this chocolate you eat with a spoon.” El explained. “Don’t worry, though, once this is done, you won’t have to eat junk food and leftovers all the time. Dad’ll buy you whatever food you want.”

“Eggos?” There was so much hope in Mike’s expression when he asked that, it was kind of funny, and also the most adorable thing El had ever seen.

“Yeah!” El nodded. “And you haven’t had pizza before, you’ll love it! And I know how to make the best grilled cheese...”

She paused, taking a breath, then continued. “The point is, once Max is back and we don’t have to hide you and the boys in the attic, you guys can live with us. We have a couple extra rooms, or we can turn the attic into a group bedroom or something. You’ll love Dad, he’s much better than what you’ve had to deal with. He’ll be your *new* Dad, a better one.”

“New Dad.” Mike smiled, seemingly liking the idea. “You’ll be sister?”



“Sister?” El asked, a panic rising in her. “What? No, no. No, no, no.”

“No?” Mike looked really sad, and a little confused. “Why ‘no’?”

“Uh...” How *exactly* would she begin to explain what she was feeling to this kid? How would she begin to explain what she was feeling to *herself*? “I... well, it’s different.”

“Why?”

“It’s dumb...”

“Not dumb.” Mike shook his head. “El?”

She sighed. “Listen, every year our school does this dumb Holiday Dance called the Snowball. It’s cheesy and really long and stuff, and Max and I haven’t ever gone because we know nobody will dance with us, but... I dunno, it seems like something you’d like. So... if you wanted to... to go together... well, I just know you’re not supposed to go with your *brother*.”

“Who do you go with?” Mike asked.

“Well, with, someone you...” El trailed off. “Someone you *like*.”

“Friend?”

“Not really, I mean you *can*...” El said. “You go with someone you... someone... uh, well, um... like a...”

Mike squeezed her hand, and with a burst of courage, El leaned forwards and kissed him.

It was a quick kiss, and probably a really bad one, but she didn’t really care; she wasn’t thinking. She leaned back, a little worried that maybe she’d scared Mike, maybe he was going to hate her now, maybe he didn’t feel that way... but no, his eyes held surprise, surprise and *happiness*. He smiled, his grin brightening the room, and El smiled back, letting out a small laugh.

There was a flash of light out the window, and El turned a little. “Oh! That’ll be... that’ll be the teens...” she said, giggling a little. “Uh, stay

here. I'll be right back."

Mike looked a little startled at the idea of her leaving, but El wanted to know how the Monster Hunt went, and, well, she was starting to get a delayed reaction of embarrassment.

She ran to the back doors, throwing them open and looking out, only to freeze in place.

She didn't see Steve's car, or Jonathan's, or even her Dad's.

There were a lot of dark, long cars pulling up, along with what looked like a truck. Several men were jumping out, and El could hear guns cocking, walkie-talkies buzzing, shouts from across the lot.

She turned around and ran back in, her feet not moving fast enough, her heart beating ten times too fast.

She rushed into the gym, seeing the boys crowded around the table, with a pile of pudding cups. Mike was simply poking at his, looking puzzled, while Dustin had gone through about five, Twelve had dumped pudding on the table to draw with, and Lucas had started drinking his.

El slid into the room, stopping right at the table. The boys all froze, recognizing the panic in her eyes. "They found us!" she managed to say, and they all jumped to their feet. Twelve grabbed onto Dustin's arm, while Mike turned to Lucas, both having matching expressions of fear.

They heard footsteps approaching, and turned to each other. "What if they have the doors covered?" El asked.

"Lucas..." Mike said. "Lucas, the shards."

Lucas's eyes widened, a fleeting look of panic, but he eventually nodded, taking a deep breath and turning to the door that had the most noise behind it. He held out his hands, shutting his eyes and steadying himself.

The last thing El saw before the darkness surrounded her was the door bursting down, and men rushing in, guns held up.

Then the blackness started to spread from Lucas, completely surrounding them all. El gasped, and she could hear sounds of surprise from the door. She suddenly felt a hand wrap around hers- it was Mike's, she could tell instantly. "What..." she whispered.

"Shards." was all Mike whispered back.

Suddenly, something glowed besides her. She turned to look, to see what looked like a golden shard of glass floating besides her. She reached up a hand to touch it, only to flinch back without even getting within a foot. It was *hot*.

*Oh, she thought, They're... they're shards of pure light.*

*Lucas has shards of pure light.*

The shard suddenly moved, rushing past her head. More shards rushed by, and the light slowly trickled back into the room. She heard the screams first, and when the light was finally back, she saw the guards on the ground, their weapons scattered, and burns all over their bodies. She gasped, and turned around, to see that Lucas was now leaning on Dustin, who turned to the rest of them. "Run." was all he said.

They ran past the burnt guards, leaping over their bodies and trying not to look. They ran down the hall, hearing shouts from other rooms, hearing loud footsteps that could come from anywhere, hearing their own hearts pounding in their ears.

El's stomach was knotted, she felt *sick*. They found them. They were going to hurt her and drag the boys away, and she was going to lose them. She was going to *lose* them.

They had almost made it to the exit, when the door flew open, and more guards came out. El heard them start to shout, and she whipped around, pushing the boys ahead of her. "Go, go, go, go, go!" she screamed, her chest threatening to burst, her legs feeling too heavy, too slow.

They made it into another hallway, only to find it blocked off by more swarming guards. El kept screaming, pushing the boys to the

other side. However, more guards started to crowd, and the children froze, whipping around. There were guards on one side, and on the other; the second side also had a tall woman, who pointed her gun straight at Mike. They were trapped.

Twelve started to audibly cry, clutching onto Dustin's arm and burying his head in his shoulder, shaking and sobbing. Dustin was panicking, starting to mutter under his breath, trying to figure out what to do. Lucas looked like he wanted to fight, but when he held out a hand out, the darkness only spread a few inches before retreating back. He was too tired. El started to panic, her breathing speeding up, her heart sinking. She slowly turned to Mike, tears in her eyes, only to freeze when she saw him.

He had a growing fire behind his eyes, a dark look that she'd never seen in him before. He stared ahead at the guards, his breath slowing as he focused, and suddenly, there was blood.

El felt herself turn cold as she watched the guards start to bleed from the eyes, still standing, still *breathing*. With a final, sickening *crunch* coming from them all, the adults toppled to the ground. Dead.

At that moment, Mike also fell.

El overcame her terror, rushing forwards and grabbing his shoulders. He was on the ground, his eyes shut. The other boys joined her, trying to grab onto him, as she started to yell. "Mike! *Mike!*"

"He's just tired..." Lucas said, his voice shaking. "He's just tired..."

"He's not waking up!" El said, still holding onto Mike, trying to lift him up, trying to *wake* him up. "*Mike!*"

"He's breathing..." Dustin said quietly.

"We have to go." El said, wondering if she could carry Mike very far.

She heard a voice down the hall. "Leave him!"

She looked up, shocked, as more guards came down, a man at the head, one she recognized from the photo. She heard Lucas and Dustin gasp behind her, and Twelve let out a choked sob. It was Brenner, it

was *Papa*.

He was stepping forwards, the guards behind him. El stood up, standing in front of the boys, holding her arms out to block them, choking tears back.

“Step away from them.” he said, his voice authoritative.

“No.” El said. “You’ll have to kill me.”

She felt a hand slip into hers; it was cold, and small. She turned slightly, and saw Twelve standing next to her, trembling with terror. He turned to Papa, and slowly shook his head. It was clear what he was saying. He was saying *No*. To Papa.

“Go away.” Dustin said, moving next to Twelve. “Go *away*!”

Lucas stepped over Mike, blocking him from view, and glaring down the men in front of them. “Eat *shit*!” he shouted.

Suddenly, El felt herself lifted off the ground, huge arms wrapped around her. She’d been caught, she was being dragged away. No, *no*!

She started to fight, trying to remember what he Dad taught her, her mind buzzing. “Let me *go*!” she screeched. “Get *away*!”

She heard the other boys scream, too; they were also being restrained. Dustin was screaming words, screaming for them to leave him alone, while Lucas just started screaming all the curse words he’d learned from El. Twelve started screeching, his loud voice echoing through the hall. El tried to drop her weight, tried to get in a place to hit her attacker, but fear was numbing her mind.

Brenner had come forwards, and sat Mike up, grabbing his head. “Let him *go*!” El started to shout, barely able to be heard above Twelve’s screams. “Let him go, you *bastard*!”

“Eleven,” he was saying. “Eleven, can you hear me?”

Mike started feebly stirring, opening his eyes, trying to filter through all the noise. “P-papa?”

“Yes, I’m here.”

“Get *off* of me!” El yelled, as Twelve took a breath and she would be able to be heard, her voice cracking. “Get *off*! Leave him *alone*!”

Mike started looking around, fear growing, breath shallow, whimpering.

“Shh, you’re sick.” Brenner said. “But I’m going to make you better. I’m going to take you home, and I can make you well again.”

“*Leave him alone!*”

“We can make all of this better,” Brenner continued, using his hands to move Mike’s head, turning him away from the direction his brothers and El were in. “No one else will get hurt.”

Mike stared at his Papa in the eyes, still trembling, barely able to keep his eyes open. He shuddered, and said, as loud as he could, “Bad.”

The other kids stopped screaming, and they all stared at Mike.

“Bad.” he repeated, shaking his head. He lifted his arm, reaching out away from Brenner, turning his head and looking at El, pleading. “El... *El*...”

Before anybody could do anything, the lights started to flicker.

Everyone froze, and Dustin said, “Blood.”

“What?” Lucas and El asked.

“Blood.” Dustin said, his face growing pale. “So much blood. The Demogorgon.”

Something thudded, and everyone looked to the far wall, where a paw-print was painted. The wall suddenly started to crumble, something bursting through. The bricks fell, and the Monster jumped in.

The Guards dropped the kids, reaching for their guns and starting to

shoot. Without wasting a second, El rushed forwards; as all the Guards ran towards the creature, Brenner went with them, and let Mike fall to the floor. “Boys!” El called, and Dustin managed to pick Mike up, and they started to run away, down the hall, away from the Monster, and from everyone else.

They kept running, as far as they could, but they didn’t know how to get out. They ducked into an empty classroom, and Dustin placed Mike on an empty table. “Barricade the door!” El yelled.

“What?” Lucas asked.

“Block it! With big things!” El said, and the boys got to work; Lucas and Dustin grabbed chairs, while Twelve started grabbing books off the shelf.

“Are you okay, Mike?” El asked, looking down at the boy and grabbing his hands. “Just hold on, okay? Hold on, please.”

Mike looked at him, tired and scared.

“He’s gone. The bad man’s gone.” El said, her voice breaking as she talked, trying not to cry. “We’ll be home soon, and Dad can get you a bed. You can eat Eggos and throw away my makeup and read *Peter Pan* until the pages fall out. The boys can come with us, we’ll all be a family. And we can go to the Snow Ball. Together.”

Mike looked up at her, trying to get enough energy to speak. “Promise?”

El tried to force a smile, holding his hands tighter. “Promise.”

Outside, the Monster roared.

El looked up, and the boys all backed up towards him, fearful. The gunshots were getting less frequent, there were more thuds, and the sinking feeling in her stomach told her that wasn’t a good thing.

The door burst down, and the barricade fell. It did nothing; the Monster leapt above it, screeching.

“Go, go, go, go!” El yelled, pushing the boys back behind her.

They didn’t have any weapons. They didn’t have *any weapons*.

The Thing got closer, and Lucas was trying to focus the Shards, but the lights just kept flickering, throwing off his concentration. The Monster suddenly rushed forwards, screaming, and Lucas threw his hands out; in a flash, the Monster was *pushed* back.

It managed to scramble to its feet on the floor, but when it approached again, it was thrown again.

If El squinted, she could see a flicker at the point the Monster couldn’t cross, that slowly arched over them. She turned, and saw Lucas, his hands still out, surprise in his eyes as he concentrated harder, his body shaking. Dustin and Twelve looked shocked, too, turning to him and then each other.

*He made us a shield.* El thought.

She looked around, trying to find anything that would help while Lucas bought them time and the Demogorgon roared from far away, waiting for him to falter. There were no weapons, the windows were on the other side of the wall, they had *nothing*.

Lucas suddenly toppled, his feet giving out, and the shield vanishing. Dustin managed to catch him, carrying him back towards the far wall, reaching out one arm and dragging Twelve, too; El followed them, standing only slightly ahead. The Demogorgon jumped forwards, and then froze midair. In a second, it was thrown against the wall, and held there.

El glanced at Lucas, but he was still lying in Dustin’s arms, only barely able to keep his eyes open, staring ahead in bewilderment.

She felt someone push past her, and suddenly Mike was in front of them, his nose streaming blood. He walked forwards, towards the Monster, and El felt a surge of panic.

“Mike, stop!” she yelled, rushing towards him. Mike threw out his arm, and El was tossed against the wall. She crumpled, and felt Twelve grab her by the shoulder, hugging her tight.



She looked up, seeing through the flashing lights; Mike kept walking towards the Monster, until he was only a few inches in front of it. He slowly turned, looking back at the children. There was a sadness in his eyes, and he looked at them all with a depressed determination.

“Goodbye.” he said.

El felt tears rush down her face, but she didn’t care. Mike had turned back to the Monster, reaching out his arm, and saying, “No more.”

The Demogorgon let out a scream, and Mike did, too. El threw her hands over her ears, not wanting to hear this, not wanting to see this. She shut her eyes, and there was a burst, and another screech, and then everything was silent.

El slowly looked up, her hands dropping, and she could feel Twelve trembling beside her. Ahead, there was only black dust across the ground.

The Monster was gone.

Mike was gone.

She got to her feet, shaking and running forwards. “Mike?” she called. “Mike!”

“Mike!” the other boys ran up, Dustin and Lucas screaming, too. Twelve simply stood among the dust, staring down at it and crying.

They were all screaming, then, yelling for Mike. “Mike, where are you? Mike!”

There was no response.

El tried to breathe, tried to think, where was he? *Where was he?*

She heard a yell, and turned to see Lucas push Dustin to the ground. She and Twelve both gasped, and Lucas yelled, “You did this! *You did this!*”

“Lucas...” Dustin was sobbing, choking his words out. “Lucas, stop...”

*"You did this! Mike is gone!"* Finally, Lucas started to cry, too, and Twelve rushed forwards, grabbing his arm and pulling him back, burying his face into his jacket. *"Mike is gone!"*

El stared at them, shaking and crying and not sure how she was still standing. But she was the first one to hear more footsteps in the hall, more shouts from everyone, and she whipped around, turning to the boys. "They're coming," she choked out. "You have to go."

"What?" Lucas said.

"They're coming. They're coming for you." El said, and rushed to the window, raising the blinds and grabbing a chair, throwing it through the glass. It shattered, and she grabbed a thick book, pounding at the remaining edges of the glass on the bottom. "You have to run! Run, before they can get here! I'll hold them off, just go!"

"El..."

She didn't know which one of them said it, her ears were ringing. She turned around, and gestured to the window. "Be careful. Get to the woods, then run to another town. Run. Just keep running."

Dustin got to his feet, and the boys ran to El, looking scared. "El..." Lucas said through his tears.

"GO!" El screamed, her own tears falling down her face.

Dustin leaned forwards, embracing her in a tight hug. Lucas and Twelve hugged her, too. It was only for a second, because the footsteps were getting closer, and then they were gone. Dustin climbed out the window, catching Lucas and Twelve as they did. El didn't look to see if they ran, didn't look to see which way they went. She couldn't take it anymore. She stumbled forwards, and fell onto the black dust. She held herself, sobbing and screaming, until the Guards arrived. She was picked up and carried, and she didn't care. She was placed in the back of an ambulance, a blanket draped over her shoulders to protect from the cold and the shock, and she didn't care. Police arrived, and she didn't care.

The first thing she noticed was when she was hugged, and she saw

Nancy, and Nancy was crying, and Jonathan and Steve were there, and Nancy tried to calm her down, tried to ask her what happened, but El just cried.

“They’re gone.” was all she said. “They ran. They’re gone.”

She cried into Nancy’s chest until a policewoman told them they had to be somewhere, and then Nancy carried her to Steve’s car, and she sat in the back with Jonathan, her emotions fading into blankness about halfway there.

“Where are we going?” she choked out.

Nancy turned to her, forcing a smile onto her face. “Your Dad got Max back. She’s alive. She’s alive, El.”

El smiled a little, but it didn’t last long. Her emotions were a raging storm, happiness and sadness a hurricane in her mind. She didn’t know what to think, what to feel.

So she leaned over onto Jonathan’s shoulder and stared into the air.

## 36. Awake

### Notes for the Chapter:

So apparently today is the "Snow Ball Day", aka it's been 33 Years since the Snow Ball scene was set, aka the perfect day to post the second-to-last chapter for this fic! :D

Also, Season Two will have ~44 chapters. Hope y'all are ready for a long freaking ride

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

#### *Awake*

The boys stopped in the Clearing. The one they were supposed to stay in, when Eleven- when *Mike* - had gone to get food. He'd insisted on going alone, wanting the others to stay safe. Everything he ever did was for them.

They hugged there, for God knew how long, even after they ran out of tears. When they finally pulled away, staring at the ground, Lucas said, "I'm sorry, Dustin."

"You're right, it's my fault." Dustin shook. "I changed the future."

"Protecting your friend." Lucas said.

Twelve looked between them, before staring at the ground.

"Where?" Lucas asked, looking into the distance.

"Far away." Dustin said. "We can't put them in danger. We have to go where we can't hurt them."

"Never see them?"

Dustin bit his lip. "It's for the best."

Twelve looked up, and he pointed towards town.

“No, away.” Dustin said. “We have to go-”

Twelve shook his head. He pointed to Dustin and Lucas, then gestured away. Then he pointed to himself, and back to town.

“You can’t go back!” Dustin yelled.

“Stay with us!” Lucas shouted.

Twelve shook his head, his eyes still wet. He grabbed onto the edge of his coat, and pointed back to town. He knew they knew exactly what he was saying; he had to go back, he *needed* to go back, and if they wouldn’t...

“We can’t split up!” Dustin said, grabbing his hand. “We can’t lose you, too!”

Twelve took a deep breath, then grabbed a stick, tapping it onto the ground.



The boys looked at him in confusion, and it took them a few seconds to figure it out. “Please...” Lucas said. “Please don’t leave.”

Twelve pointed to the two of them, and then placed his hand over his heart. It was a clear message: *You’ll still be here.*

Dustin and Lucas hugged him again, and they cried again, and held onto each other for as long as they could. Then they all stood up, and looked to each other.

“We’ll come for you.” Lucas said. “When safe.”

“We love you.” Dustin added. “Brother.”

“Brother.” Lucas nodded.

Twelve smiled at them, and wiped his tears away, and then ran.

He had to run. If he went too slow, he would look back, and if he

would look back, he didn't know if he could keep going.

The waiting room was white, and plain, and boring. El had been reunited with her Dad there, and she'd hugged him, but she couldn't cry anymore. He just said, "We found her."

El just said, "The boys are gone."

And they sat together. Nancy sat by them in another chair; Hopper suggested she call her parents, but she shook her head, saying they wouldn't come. Steve sat with her instead. Jonathan had been sitting with them, but then Joyce had walked into the room, and he'd jumped to his feet, yelling, "Mom!" and they'd hugged, and Joyce had cried and apologized, and now they were sitting across from the rest.

There were chairs saved for Max's parents, who had been called. They were supposed to come soon. El wondered for a while if they would.

Eventually, the Doctors had come in, and told Hopper that she was stable, and two people could wait with her. So El was sitting in the room with her Dad and her unconscious best friend, staring at her. Her red hair was wet, and her face was pale. El had to focus on her face; looking at her hospital gown just reminded her of her loss.

It took a few hours of silence, and then Max blinked her eyes open. "Dad?" she asked, and when El and Hopper turned to her, she said, "H-Hopper? El?"

"Hey." Hopper said, raising his hand in greeting, as El gasped and reached forwards, grabbing her hand. "Hey, kid. How you feeling?"

Max looked between them. "Wh-where am I?"

"Hospital." El said, a smile growing on her face. "You've been here before."

Max glanced around, still worried. "What's going on?"

"You got hurt, Max." Hopper said. "Hurt real bad. But you're here now. You're safe. We'll take care of you."

"The Doctors said you'll be in here a few days." El added. "Tomorrow I'll bring you a box of stuff. Books, puzzles, whatever you want. Jonathan says he'll teach me to make a mix tape."

"Jonathan?" Max asked.

"Byers." El said, smiling. "His Mom's the nice lady at the General Store who didn't press charges when you ran into the shelves."

The door opened, and Max's Mom ran in. "Oh my God, Maxine!" she yelled, and El stepped back as she threw her arms around her. "Maxine!"

El looked back at Hopper, as Max's Stepdad came in. Hopper was giving the man a dark look, and he turned to El. "Why don't you tell the others she's awake?" he asked, and she nodded, giving Max a quick sympathetic look as she did.

Max's Mom was fussing again. She did that whenever she actually payed attention, but Max was finally sick of it. She managed to push herself away when her Mom started to grab her hair, and she heard her Stepdad talking; he hadn't even bothered to say hello to her. "Can't believe we paid for a funeral and it wasn't even her."

"She's here now." Hopper said, his voice steady.

Her Stepdad huffed. "Well, she better get well soon. We're leaving tomorrow."

"Leaving?" Max asked, her voice shaking.

Her Mom looked down at her, a pained smile on her face. "Yes, sweetheart. Billy ran away, we're gonna find him."

"She's not going anywhere." Hopper said, crossing his arms. "She can't leave for quite a few days."

"I'm sure the Doctors can speed some shit up." Her Stepdad said. "We're leaving tomorrow so my asshole son can't get too far."

"She *can't leave*." Hopper said. "She just got back to life, Hargrove, she can barely breathe."

"We're not waiting up for her."

"Then let her stay with me." Hopper's voice raised, and the room was suddenly very quiet. He continued, "Let her stay with me. I'll take care of her."

"Like hell." Her Stepdad said. "We're not going to drop her off with a stranger-"

"I've known her for years!" Hopper interrupted.

"She's coming with us-"

"No."

The adults all turned to Max in shock. She managed to sit up in bed, and she was staring her Stepdad in the face. She knew he thought he was in control of her, that he *had* been in control before. But she'd been through Hell, she'd lived through it for a week, and if she knew one thing from her shitty week, she knew this: She wasn't scared of him anymore.

"I'm staying with Hopper." she said. "I want to stay home."

El ran back into the room, dragging Nancy by the hand. "Max!" Nancy yelled, and the two rushed past the adults, who were discussing something in the corner of the room. Max smiled as Nancy gave her a hug, and said, "We were so worried! God, Max, we had a funeral for you!"

"You did?" Max smirked. "Who cried?"

"Your Mom." El said. "And Jennifer Hayes, and a couple other kids."



“What, not you?” Max asked.

“Oh, no, I knew you were alive.” El said. “M-Mike showed me.”

Max looked at her in confusion. “Mike?”

El sighed, bit her lip, and said, “He- he’s a friend. He helped us find you. Him, and his brothers. We can tell you all about it when you’re outta here.”

“I’ll look forward to it.” Max smiled. “Cause I think I’m gonna be your sister for a while.”

“What?”

Jonathan and Joyce went home pretty early. Max didn’t know them very well, so Joyce just came in and said Hello, made sure she was alright, and then drove back.

Jonathan warned her about the traps in the corner, and she nodded. After a second, he asked, “What happened to you?”

She sighed. “The Lab tried to break me again.”

They drove the rest of the way in silence, and then they went into the house, and Joyce went to sit in the Living Room. Jonathan watched her from the doorway; she was staring at the wall, a blank look on her face. He sighed and turned away, going to his room instead.

He sat on his own bed, looking at the ceiling, until he heard a tap on the window.

He took a deep breath, his hopes rising, and he turned around.

There he was. Twelve was outside the window, one hand on the bottom of the rim and the other tapping the glass. Jonathan’s face lit up, and the window was open within seconds. He reached out his arm, and Twelve grabbed onto him, and then he pulled him into the room and hugged him. “Oh, God.” he said. “Oh, God, I thought you left.”

Twelve shook his head, a smile on his face. When they pulled away, Twelve took Jonathan's coat off, holding it out for him. Jonathan took it, looking back at the kid, and he said, "Come with me."

"Mom?"

Jonathan stood just outside the doorway, waiting until Joyce looked back at him. "Yes?" she asked hesitantly, her voice quiet.

Jonathan took a deep breath. "There's... there's someone I'd like you to meet."

She looked at him in confusion, and he reached out his hand. "Come on." he said, a comforting smile on his face.

And then Twelve walked in.

Joyce leapt to her feet once she saw him, completely in shock. Twelve stood beside Jonathan, holding his hand and looking up at her. He was dirty, in a hospital dress that hadn't been washed in days, and he simply stared up at her, fear and hope written all across his face.

"Mom..." Jonathan said, his voice breaking. "Mom, this is Will."

Joyce raised a hand to her mouth, and there was silence as they kept staring at each other.

Will Byers looked up at her, and said, "Mom?"

Joyce rushed forwards and grabbed him, hugging him close to her and sobbing. Will jumped a little, and then hugged her back, saying, "Mom. Mom. *Mom!*"

Jonathan joined the hug, and then all the Byers were hugging in their Living Room, a Monster Trap in the corner, burn marks in the hallway, and windows that would have to be shut, doors that would have to be locked, secrets that would have to be kept.

Nothing could be more perfect.

## Notes for the Chapter:

btw the Byers Reunion is my favorite scene of "Season One" of *Rightside Up*. I had it planned from the beginning and it was so nice to actually write it.  
:D

## 37. Epilogue

### CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

#### *Epilogue*

“Beat that, dipshit!”

El let out a cheer as Max stepped back, smirking. Princess Daphne had jumped into Dirk the Daring’s arms, and *Dragon’s Lair* was won.

“Yes!” El yelled. “*Hell yeah!*”

She and Max high-fived and then hugged, jumping up and down. “We win!” Max yelled. “I beat it! I beat the game!”

“It only took a month.” El smirked.

“I’d like to see you try to beat that.” Max laughed.

El stepped back, throwing her arms up. “Oh, hell no. Daphne’s all yours.”

Max laughed and elbowed her, and then glanced at the clock. “Shit, Dad’s outside!”

“He’s *my* Dad.” El said as they walked, but they both could tell she wasn’t actually bothered.

“And he’s mine until my shitty parents get back.” Max said. “So you’re gonna have to deal with me, *baby sis!*”

“*I’m older than you!*”

They laughed and ran past the arcade game, bursting out the door and running up to the Police Chief’s car, jumping into the backseat.

“We killed the Dragon!” El cheered as soon as she sat down. “Max *killed the goddamn dragon!*”

"Nice!" Hopper said, reaching out to high-five the other girl as she walked in. "We've got a Knight in the family now!"

"Damn right!" Max cheered, shutting the door. "Now, how about that Christmas Party?"

"It's not a *party*." El said as they drove away. "It's just us and Nancy and Steve."

"That's two more people than are usually at your place for Christmas." Max teased. "It's a party."

El rushed into the house, throwing her bag into the corner. Nancy and Steve walked in. "Hey, kiddos!" Nancy cheered, holding up a cake. "Look what we managed to not burn in the kitchen!"

"You used the oven?" Hopper asked.

"It was her idea." Steve said, gesturing to Nancy, who stuck her tongue out at him.

"Cake!" Max cheered. "Holy shit, it is Christmas!"

El looked at the laughing group, and smiled a little, before saying, "Hey, I'll be right down. I've got all your presents in our room."

"That's why I told you to put them on the table! Don't take too long!" Max said, and El grinned at her before rushing up the stairs.

Nancy looked around, before saying, "Hey, um, I'll be right back. I just realized I forgot to tell my Mom where I am, I'll just stop by the store and call her."

"Or I could fix the phone." Steve suggested. "Honestly, Chief, it can't take *that* long."

"We just don't use it much." Hopper shrugged. "Not worth the trouble."

Nancy moved to leave, and Steve grabbed her hand. "Wait!"

Nancy smiled, and quickly kissed him on the cheek. “Don’t worry, I’ll only be a second.”

Max ducked into the bathroom. She just had to wash her hands real quick; God knew how many people touched that *Dragon’s Lair* game. However, when she reached for the sink, she felt something rise in her throat. She started to cough, to *retch*, and grabbed onto the edge of the sink, before she threw *something* up into it.

She looked down, and managed to see the edge of a slug rush down the drain, leaving the slime behind. She blinked, and suddenly the room was blue, and cold, and dark, and covered in webbing. She jumped back, breathing hard, and shook, shutting her eyes until the room got warmer. She opened her eyes, and the room was normal again.

She took a deep breath, then turned the water on, watching as the slime disappeared. Nobody would know it was there.

Nancy didn’t go to the store.

She walked into the woods, glancing around in the snow. Nothing was there, but she could see faint footprints. They might have been hers, or a hiker’s, but she had her own guesses. She bent down into the dirt, and brushed snow away from the top of a metal box. She opened it, smiling when she saw it was empty. She reached into her coat pocket, and pulled out a carefully-wrapped Eggo Sandwich. She placed it inside, closed the lid, and turned to go.

El walked right past her room.

She could grab the presents later. She wouldn’t be too long.

The trapdoor ladder fell down, and she climbed up, shutting the door as she made it to the attic. It hadn’t been touched in a month, and she kept it that way. Carefully, El stepped over a lamp on the floor,

and walked into the blanket fort, sitting on the ground.

Her walkie-talkie was on top of a pillow. She grabbed it, pressed and held a button, and called,

“It’s Day Twenty-Nine. Mike, are you there?”

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

#### **ALRIGHT SO HERE'S THE DEALIO**

I actually finished writing all of Season Two yesterday- appropriate, since yesterday was the 33rd anniversary of the Snow Ball- so it will be a chapter a day unless I can't reach the computer that day, in which case I'll probably tell you. I'm not sure if I'll be starting posting Season Two tomorrow or Monday; either way, it won't be a long wait. The update schedule will be, unless otherwise stated, around 3:00pm EST except on Saturdays, when chapters will be posted ~12:30-1:00 EST.

Of the newly introduced characters for Season Two- The Hargroves, Bob, Erica, Max, Kali + her Squad, and Owens- a couple of them had to be completely cut (I tried but I couldn't find a way to write them in), though OBVIOUSLY Max will still be there. Kali's introduction will be a little different, too, due to the different circumstances around the Boys and who was in the Rainbow Room.

There will be a grand total of Forty-Four Chapters, and once those are done, the "main story" will be on Hiatus until Season Three is out, and then I'll have to take a couple days to plan out how to work around what's introduced and play on what I established in Seasons One and Two. UNTIL THEN, I think I'll probably have a "slice-of-life" fic going on, with random, out-of-order one-shots from this AU, so that I don't forget about it until Season Three.

I hope you enjoyed Season One, and THANK YOU SO MUCH FOR YOUR COMMENTS! I literally freak out whenever I see them, I love all of your nice words! :D I hope you like Season Two!

EDIT: Here's the link to Season Two! <http://archiveofourown.org/works/13046202/chapters/29841528>